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## The Ethno Hope Sessions: Sustaining intercultural musical exchange during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### Article Info.

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### Abstract

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The purpose of this article is to consider how Ethno World, a global youth music network, has sustained its practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and, in so doing, provided a mechanism that supported the wellbeing of both its artistic mentors and participants. Through an exploration of the Hope Sessions, an online teaching platform created during the lockdown period, we investigate how a recontextualized musical practice has created both challenges and opportunities for those that have worked within it. Using a hybrid ethnographic strategy and a theoretical framework based upon a 'web of artistic practice' and an 'ecological perspective', we argue that the online musical encounters have provided a conduit through which musicians associated with Ethno World have been able to develop new pedagogic skills, new relationships, sustain existing friendships and find comfort within enforced social isolation. In conclusion, we suggest that online musical experiences can provide opportunities for new and unexpected forms of interaction that may lead to conceptions of intercultural exchange that move beyond Eurocentric perspectives and consequently enhance society's wellbeing through healthy social connections.

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**Keywords:** Ethno, intercultural, wellbeing, recontextualisation, online, music

### 1. Introduction

Ethno gatherings are annual multi-sited residential music camps present in over 24 countries across Europe, Nordic Regions, and the 'Global South'. It is global youth music network NGO *Jeunesses Musicales International's* (JMI)<sup>1</sup> programme for folk, world and traditional music, aimed at young musicians aged 13-30. The basic premise of the activity is that musicians bring a song from their musical tradition and share it during a facilitated music session. The participants then arrange the shared songs and perform them in a concert at the camp's closing.

The last Ethno gathering prior to international borders closing due to the COVID-19 pandemic was Ethno India. During the 10-day event, fears over the rapid spread of COVID-19 began to escalate throughout the world. In India specifically, youth hostels and hotels began requiring visitors to have medical reports that demonstrated an all-clear for COVID-19 symptoms, consequently leaving some participants seeking alternative accommodation because the requirements were not in place prior to travel. As Ethno India progressed, the government announced that public events were to be cancelled. The organisers decided to perform their final showcase with a limited live audience consisting of invited guests only and stream the concert via Facebook instead.<sup>ii</sup> Throughout the week, participants became increasingly concerned about their journey home, some choosing to leave earlier than initially planned whilst others were facing imposed quarantine upon arrival in their home country.

One Ethno organiser noticed how the freelance musicians involved with Ethno India were becoming increasingly concerned about the impact the pandemic would have on their economic survival. The organiser noted that there was a feeling of ‘depression’ and ‘negativity’ and felt that Ethno should do something because it ‘is a platform which provides hope to the people’ (Advik, interview, June 2020). He approached JMI, the managing body of Ethno World<sup>iii</sup>, suggesting that they start online-tune learning workshops to support musicians’ self-development during the pandemic. JMI agreed to the idea, and the ‘Hope Sessions’ became a reality (Advik, interview, June 2020).

This article considers how Ethno World has sustained its practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing further insight into the intrinsic values and practices essential to the Ethno community and a deeper understanding of music’s role during social isolation. Based on the premise that musical practice is impacted by the environment through which it takes place, we explore what happens when there is a dramatic change in the ecological environment and how it affects musical practices’ sustainability. Our findings suggest that the Hope Sessions acted as an opportunity for the Ethno community to connect during social isolation, enabling increased intercultural engagement and collaboration and consequently supporting participants’ wellbeing by providing self-development opportunities for musicians whose livelihood had been impacted by the cancellation of Ethno gatherings.

## 2. Methodology

Before the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we participated at Ethno gatherings in Portugal, Sweden, New Zealand and India in 2019 and 2020. As such, it was difficult not to compare the Hope Sessions to these experiences. Whilst this may be counterintuitive to an online ethnography, where interaction is based on online encounters (Waldron, 2018), it placed us in a similar position to that of the Ethno community at large. This group were far more familiar with face-to-face encounters rather than engaging with Ethno teaching sessions online. Due to the influence of offline fieldwork, we locate this study as a hybrid ethnography, which is situated in both a digital and physical environment (Przybylski, 2021).

Ethnographic fieldwork occurred between April and June of 2020. It comprised of participant observation in nine online Hope Sessions (Sessions 1; 2; 10; 12; 20; 21; 25; 26). Sessions lasted between thirty minutes to an hour and were hosted on ‘Facebook live’ through the Ethno World Facebook page.<sup>iv</sup> Gibson participated by singing or playing along during the live event, following the artistic mentor’s instruction.<sup>v</sup> Gibson took field notes and observed what other participants were communicating in the live event’s comments section. Further data was gathered through the Ethno World YouTube page.<sup>vi</sup>

Participant observation was triangulated with seven semi-structured online interviews conducted via Skype, Zoom or Facebook Messenger. Interviews were scheduled for May and June 2020. Three interviews were with artistic mentors, two with the Hope Sessions organisers [izers] and one with participants in the Hope Sessions. Another interview was conducted with a member of the Ethno Digital organising team, Mason. Two further participants preferred to correspond via email. These participants

both lived in New Zealand and felt the time difference and also their work commitments prevented them from finding a convenient time for an interview. One of them answered the research questions in an email. The second, an anthropology student, agreed to write fieldnotes during one of the Hope Sessions and later forwarded them through email.

### 2.1 *Research Participants*

Seven out of the nine participants had been previously interviewed at offline gatherings. We had also met the organizer of the Hope Sessions at an Ethno committee meeting in 2019. Therefore, only one interviewee, Andrik, was not previously known to the researchers.<sup>vii</sup> The decision to interview him was because his session had the most views at the time of research. Research participants were provided with research questions prior to being interviewed because English was a second language to four of the participants. Participants were also provided with the final written transcript of their interview to provide any further feedback.

### 2.2 *Data analysis*

Interview transcripts and field notes were read and discussed multiple times before the data was analysed using NVIVO qualitative analysis software. Thematic coding techniques were used to construct themes based on the data, which were then analysed and refined to identify the four key themes: (1) artistic practice in a new ecological environment, (2) online engagement and collaboration, (3) accessibility and inclusivity, and, (4) online engagement and intercultural exchange. Ethical clearance for the project was granted by York St John University.

## 3. **Theoretical frameworks: The environment and musical engagement**

Fundamental to the article's argument is that significant changes in creative environments impact both the individual practice of an artist as well as a broader musical practice. Two research frameworks relating to this issue were particularly useful: (1) Coessens (2014) 'web of artistic practice' and (2) Schippers and Grant (2016) 'ecological approach to sustainability'. Coessens considers the individual artist and the various dimensions through which they engage with their practice. She argues, 'this web of expertise functions as a kind of dynamic artistic background, an internalised and integrated whole on which the artist relies for his or her creativity' (69). This idea complements Schippers and Grant's work, which examine musical cultures, reflecting on the multiple elements that need to be in place and interact with one another to remain sustainable.

Whilst Ethno is not a musical culture; it is a musical practice that draws from a variety of genres and styles, in much the same way a community choir or band does. This makes the sustainability of these forms of practice quite complex because what necessitates sustainability is not a musical tune or instrument but the manner in which members of a community of practice engage with one another through music. Schippers and Grant (2016) suggest conceiving a musical practice or genre within an ecosystem. They argue that

examining forces of music sustainability through an ecological perspective may help identify and clarify the vibrancy, strengths, and weaknesses of a music genre, and the ways in which the factors in its vitality and viability interrelate (340).

Therefore, when one factor within a musical ecosystem changes, it has the potential to affect the sustainability of a musical practice.

Both Coessens (2014) and Schippers and Grant (2016) consider practice as a complex interaction between multiple factors (see Table One). Coessens embraces the individual artist's practice, whilst Schippers and Grant look at broader musical genres. As shall be demonstrated in this article, an individual

artist can profoundly influence the progression of musical practice, whilst changes in a musical practice can influence an artist's conceptualisation of their creative expression. This interplay is important to consider when reflecting on the role of music during social isolation because the changes in conceptualisation of musical practice can influence elements within the musical ecosystem and the wellbeing of the musician.

**Table 1** Web of Artistic Practice (Coessens, 2014) and Ecological Approach to Sustainability, (Schippers and Grant, 2016)

| <b>Web of Artistic Practice<br/>(Coessens 2014)</b> | <b>Ecological approach to sustainability<br/>(Schippers, 2016)</b> |
|---|--|
| Cultural semiotic codes                             | Systems of learning music  |
| Embodied artistic know-how                          | Musicians and communities  |
| Personal knowledge                                  | Contexts and constructs  |
| Interactivity                                       | Regulation and infrastructure                                      |
| Ecological environment                              | Media and the music industry                                       |

#### 4. Literature

An online platform for engagement has impacted the 'contexts and constructs' of the Ethno practice (see Table 1). Schippers (2016: 336) describes this domain as 'the relationship between music and their physical and conceptual environment'. He includes a 'sense of wellbeing' as one of the 'forces' within this domain that impacts sustainability (341). There are various examples in the literature of online platforms being used for community music making or cultural exchange (Klopper, 2010; Miller, 2012; Waldron, 2018, Josef, Nethsinghe, and Cabedo-Mas, 2020). Miller (2012) and Waldron (2018) both note the value of online musical practices in that they provide access to people who may not have the resources to participate in face-to-face music lessons or group activities. Nakayama (2020) and Josef et al (2020) caution that there can be problems with internet connectivity or issues of cultural dominance on these platforms that may not always be addressed. Furthermore, engaging in an online platform when one is more familiar with the intimacy of face-to-face encounters can be difficult. However, Waldron (2018) emphasizes that there are examples of online social media platforms acting as communities of practice.

Many musical practices have shifted their context over time, such as from local festivals to competitive events (Reily, 2013). This level of adaptability is part of a musical tradition as it adapts and changes to society's needs. 'Contexts and constructs' relate to Coessens 'ecological environment' (see Table 1). Coessens (2014: 74) writes, 'creative acts are thus sustained and/or constrained by the context. Furthermore, these contexts differ: as humans grow up and live-in other cultures, different physical and social environments can stimulate or discourage creativity'. Concerning the ecological environment, Coessens argues, 'all artistic practice is situated, it occurs in an ecological and material setting that creates specific conditions that have an impact on the artists and their activity' (77). She suggests that three aspects might be considered when exploring the relationship between the environment and the artist: the presence of the environment, the artist's coping response, and the influence of the artist (77). Considering the coping response of the artist relates directly to issues of wellbeing.

Clift, et al (2016: 8-9) write that 'the arts at heart are about creativity and problem-solving, and above all about helping to create both meaning and a sense of beauty in all our lives'. According to Barnes (2016: 203), wellbeing includes a 'sense of environmental control, careful of its sustainability, generous and respectful social relations and a sense of purpose that is both inclusive and just'. Perkins, et al (2020) devised four pathways to demonstrate how participatory music engagement supports mental health and

wellbeing: managing and expressing emotions, facilitating self-development, providing respite and facilitating connections. The pathway relating to self-development highlights three areas relevant to this paper: developing skills, giving a sense of purpose, and promoting agency (Perkins, et al 2020: 1930). A 'positive sense of personal agency' is also recognised as important to wellbeing by Welch, Biasutti, MacRitchie and McPherson (2020). Saarikallio, Randal and Baltazar (2020) relate this to the individual's ability to influence ones environment, or self-efficacy. When reflecting on self-efficacy and changing societies, Bandura (1995: 1, 38) argues for 'social initiatives that build collective efficacy', highlighting how exercising influence in what one can control could lead towards a 'desired future'.

Another key element of wellbeing through musical participation is social engagement, or connection (Higgins and Willingham, 2017; Perkins, et al 2020). One of the values within Ethno musical practice is connecting with musicians from different parts of the world and encouraging positive intercultural exchange.<sup>viii</sup> Aman (2013) describes interculturality as 'the interactions among cultures and the importance of fostering and guiding such relations' (281). Criticisms of the conception of the term relate to it being Eurocentric and not effectively recognising the dominant power structures born out of colonialism (Aman, 2013; Mantie and Risk, 2020; Martin and Pirbai Illich, 2016; Dearthoff, 2011; Nakayama, 2020). However, Bartleet, Grant, Mani, and Tomlinson (2020) note that intercultural learning can help develop a musician's musical identity by bringing forth a deeper awareness of oneself. Bartleet (2019) argues for the importance of self-reflection and awareness of dominant power structures within intercultural settings as a means of overcoming some of the innate problems that may occur within intercultural exchange. This suggests a need for more effective interventions, as intercultural exchange can be left to unmediated informal encounters (Mantie and Risk, 2020; Montalbán, Llorrente and Zurita, 2020). The transition to online social engagement through the Hope Sessions drew attention to how Ethno encourages intercultural exchange and connection. Two issues relate to the literature on intercultural understanding. Firstly, whilst Ethno was initially founded in Europe, the Hope Sessions were conceived by somebody from India, not Europe, providing insight into a non-Eurocentric perception of interculturality. Secondly, the online platform is a more formal space than the Ethno camps, which has challenged how Ethno organisers approach intercultural exchange, causing a deeper reflection on how to engage in a more formal, mediated manner.

What makes the COVID-19 situation unique is that large numbers of people around the world were required to self-isolate for a certain period, meaning they had to work from home and were only able to leave the house to shop for essential items and outdoor exercise. Due to the uniqueness of the situation, there is limited research into music's role in this type of social isolation. Unlike examples of world-wide catastrophic events in the past, such as the two world wars, people have been unable to meet with one another offline, which has impacted the sustainability of many participatory musical activities.<sup>ix</sup> By focusing on sustainability, insights are gained regarding a musician's self-development and understanding of their practice when they are unable to connect offline. What becomes apparent through this research is that as a direct result of social isolation, participants' perception of the purpose of Ethno changed, which affected how and why musicians engaged with the Hope Sessions.

## 5. Case Study: The Hope Sessions

The Hope Sessions ran from April 6 until June 28, 2020. Forty sessions took place over twelve weeks. Folk tunes were presented from 27 countries (See Table 2). Views of the videos on both Facebook and YouTube range from 18 to 6,800 as of April 2021 a total of over 80,000 views. The sessions ended shortly before Ethno Croatia, which ran in early July 2020.

To get the Hope sessions up and running Advik and JMI approached those who have had music leadership roles within Ethno gatherings. The reasoning was two-fold. Firstly, as this was to be presented

on a public platform, they wanted to approach people they knew were competent music facilitators. Secondly, it was an opportunity to showcase their skills to a broader audience.

The Sessions were presented 'live' via Ethno World's Facebook page, initially three times a week and then reduced to twice a week. They accommodated disparate time zones by presenting one session at a time more suited to the Ethno community based in the Southern Hemisphere. During the 'live' sessions, observers could comment in the 'comments sections', either engaging directly with the facilitator or other participants. Sessions ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. When Sessions were completed, they were uploaded to Ethno World's YouTube page. Advik was responsible for designing posters, contacting session leaders, and supporting them through learning how to give an online presentation. He also wrote the descriptions of the events and uploaded completed sessions to YouTube.

The YouTube page contains more detailed written information about each of the tunes performed and a biography of the facilitators. This page describes the objectives of the sessions as:

- To start online tune-learning sessions by experienced Ethno organisers and artistic leaders;
- To build a spirit of positivity during this time;
- To connect Ethno musicians worldwide via this initiative;
- To create a digital library of songs / tunes from around the world that people of all ages can learn from (Ethno World, 2020).

At the beginning of a session, the presenter is asked to explain their connection to Ethno. They then begin teaching. Sessions can be divided into the following formats:

- Teaching a tune;
- Teaching an original song (only one session);
- Teaching rudiments and a tune;
- Teaching rudiments.

Out of the forty videos, four included more than one person presenting. In some sessions, the organisers of the Hope Sessions acted as facilitators in the comments section. They would do this by asking the presenter to repeat a section of music or post lyrics, mnemonics, or chord progressions to the tune, or song, being taught.

**Table 2** Hope Sessions

| Series # | Countries Represented | # of Facebook Views | # of YouTube Views |
|----------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1        | Germany               | 2500                | 199                |
| 2        | India                 | 2300                | 283                |
| 3        | Germany               | 1700                | 82                 |
| 4        | Estonia               | 1400                | 67                 |
| 5        | Belgium               | 1900                | 65                 |
| 6        | New Zealand           | 734                 | 40                 |
| 7        | United Kingdom        | 1300                | 18                 |
| 8        | Sweden                | 2200                | 125                |
| 9        | France                | 1500                | 80                 |

|    |                        |       |       |
|----|------------------------|-------|-------|
| 10 | Bosnia-<br>Herzegovnia | 6800  | 1047  |
| 11 | Armenia                | 1100  | 47    |
| 12 | India                  | 990   | 117   |
| 13 | Jordan                 | 1400  | 261   |
| 14 | Sweden                 | 2200  | 181   |
| 15 | Bulgaria               | 641   | 45    |
| 16 | Israel                 | 3000  | 4712  |
| 17 | Norway                 | 2000  | 86    |
| 18 | Chile                  | 1100  | 62    |
| 19 | France                 | 2000  | 77    |
| 20 | Taiwan                 | 2700  | 49    |
| 21 | Istria                 | 2600  | 131   |
| 22 | Belgium                | 2700  | 388   |
| 23 | Sweden                 | 1600  | 166   |
| 24 | Poland                 | 604   | 43    |
| 25 | India                  | 1800  | 43    |
| 26 | Mozambique             | 778   | 75    |
| 27 | Mongolia               | 752   | 160   |
| 28 | Denmark                | 1800  | 88    |
| 29 | Chile                  | 1900  | 193   |
| 30 | Sweden                 | 1100  | 32    |
| 31 | India                  | 1512  | 310   |
| 32 | Corsica                | 508   | 87    |
| 33 | Greece                 | 1200  | 62    |
| 34 | Croatia                | 1300  | 105   |
| 35 | Finland                | 1500  | 349   |
| 36 | USA                    | 664   | 28    |
| 38 | India                  | 6500  | 8     |
| 37 | Turkey                 | 2600  | 262   |
| 39 | Sweden                 | 945   | 47    |
| 40 | Estonia                | 1100  | 37    |
|    | <b>TOTAL</b>           | 72928 | 10257 |

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Artistic practice in a new ecological environment

One of the Hope Sessions aims was to provide an opportunity for musicians to enhance their pedagogic skills.<sup>x</sup> Advik felt that an opportunity to hone personal artistic practice could support the wellbeing of musicians by providing something to focus on during the restrictions. By participating in the



Hope Sessions, musicians may, as Advik stated, 'survive the situation and get something out of it' (Advik, interview June 2020). With the support of JMI, Advik was able to create online sessions that could be a regular meeting point for members of the Ethno community, providing a sense of purpose and opportunity for self-development to those musicians who were facing the cancellation of gigs and Ethno events during the Summer. This initiative resulted in Ethno transitioning to an online platform, providing a means for the programme to continue albeit in a different context and demonstrates how an environmental change can influence a musical practice (Coessens, 2014) and demonstrates how self-efficacy can impact a changing society (Bandura, 1995).

Typically, artistic leaders at Ethno gatherings facilitate sessions by supporting a camp participant. The participant teaches a song or a tune, whilst the artistic leader guides them through the process. In the Hope sessions, however, artistic leaders present the music material. This process provided an opportunity to share their musical traditions and learn to teach in a digital environment. Coessens (2014: 72) notes how artists acquire an 'embodied artistic know-how' whereby they develop 'a seemingly natural and spontaneous yet very elaborated and sophisticated praxis of how to behave, cope and think artistically, and thus how to engage in a process of creation'. The new ecological environment within which facilitators were now working challenged this logic as they were less certain about how to behave, cope and think artistically. Indeed, all the facilitators that were interviewed commented on how hard it was to teach in this particular setting. They were more familiar with the immediate feedback gained through face-to-face encounters and had to adapt to teaching in a new environment.

The aim of the 'live' session was to encourage interaction through the comments section; however, facilitators did not always feel that they were able to engage with participants. One facilitator noted that when they looked to see how many people were watching the video, the number was relatively low, which was demotivating (Annya, Interview, May 2020). She also noted a time delay between when comments were made and when she received them. This meant that she had moved on to a new idea before being able to address a comment relating to the previous one.

Almost all facilitators commented on how strange it was to be presenting to a computer screen rather than to a group of people. One facilitator, Andrik (Interview, June 2020) pointed out how musicians learn through the 'organic presence' of another person by 'subconsciously picking up some things' a similar observation by Coessens (2014: 73) concerning the domain of personal knowledge, which she refers to as 'unarticulated tacit knowledge'. In this instance, understanding and awareness within a practice are linked to an environmental and contextual background whereby the 'subconscious picking up' of knowledge is based on personal knowledge built over time within a particular context. Based on both interviews and participant observation, the new online context was difficult for both facilitators and participants due to a lack of knowledge about learning within this particular context, particularly when it came to feeling connected through the music.

The most significant advantage to having an online session for some of the facilitators was the opportunity to 'dig more deeply' into the rudiments and meanings behind the songs being shared. The interviewed musicians found this opportunity very rewarding (Annya, Interview, May 2020; Naira, Interview, May 2020; Andrik, Interview, June 2020; Ben, Email correspondence, May 2020). Naira (Interview, May 2020) explains:

[During the gatherings] breaking down the composition doesn't happen that much because you are ultimately aiming at completing the session and the song, rather than going into the fundamentals and the basics. So, this is more like a teaching session rather than teaching for an arrangement or teaching for a concert, which makes all the difference... Ethno sessions are more about the product. Here, it's more about the elements that make a product. The character that comes along with it.

Andrik (Interview, June, 2020) also realised that he needed to change how he taught the session. He commented:

I was aware that if I were going to do this online session, it will be more like a workshop. Like a presentation that people can watch later on. And I kept in mind that I needed to be brief and clear and that if people wanted to hear something several times, they will be able to pause and rewind the video.

This is a different approach to an Ethno gathering, where tunes are being taught by rote. Repetition is part of the process; however, Hope Sessions facilitators commented that it felt strange to ask participants to repeat a line of melody when, in reality, they could not hear them doing so. There was, therefore, a recognition that teaching approaches were needing to be adapted to an environment where direct feedback from participants was not easy to achieve.

These artistic mentors' experiences demonstrate how they were impacted by being in a different ecological environment. They experienced a tangible difference between online and offline facilitation, making it difficult to connect with participants at times. However, it also provided the opportunity to become more familiar with using online platforms for sharing their music, which has been an important skill to learn when public performances have been limited due to COVID-19 restrictions. All the artistic mentors mentioned how presenting a Hope session improved their confidence when teaching online sessions, with some, such as Andrik, becoming inspired to pursue further online tune learning activities. The new online environment did challenge the artists' coping response, as Coessen's (2014) observes; however, it also provided an opportunity for self-development (Perkins, et al, 2020). The acquisition of new skills, such as learning how to present to a screen, rather than a group of people, to support online teaching and the opportunity to practice these skills with the support of the Hope Session organising team provided the artistic mentors with the opportunity to positively influence this new working environment (Saarikuulo, Randall and Baltazar, 2020). Providing a positive sense of agency in this manner, supported their wellbeing (Welch, et al. 2020).

The wellbeing of the artist can be seen as directly relating to how a musical practice can sustain itself. Artistic leaders and Ethno organisers were facing a loss of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic, needing some support to guide them through the lockdowns. The Hope Sessions became an opportunity to provide some agency to those most financially impacted by the Hope Sessions: The sessions gave organisers and artistic leaders the opportunity to develop their skillsets and learn how to present events online, providing agency in a situation where the change in environment had taken some of their agency away.

The current reliance on online platforms for connection through music making during self-isolation appears to be providing opportunities for Ethno musicians to recontextualize their understandings of their musical practice and further extend their self-development whilst supporting musical interactions vitally important for their wellbeing. The Hope Sessions demonstrate both the artist's resilience and the adaptability of the Ethno musical practice as they adjust to a new ecological and conceptual environment. Schippers and Grant (2016) observed that recontextualisation becomes an advantage and an opportunity to refine practice.

## 6.2 Online engagement and collaboration, accessibility and inclusivity

One of the key elements in an Ethno gathering is that of collaboration with participants. Participants are encouraged to share their music and ‘jam’ together during their free time. This creates an atmosphere where most people at the camp are receiving new tunes and sharing their own music. It also creates opportunities for social connection through music (Higgins, 2020a). This is notably absent in the online sessions, with participants' experience being that it is not really a ‘two-way thing’ (Mason, Interview, May 2020).

One of the facilitators shared a concern that Ethno participants may not be interested in the Hope Sessions saying, ‘Ethno people will be more interested about how to collaborate together, not learn in a class’. (Annya, interview May 2020). She shared an example of Ethno participants collaborating to create an online recording. This ‘togetherness’ occurred independently of Ethno World through a separate Facebook page created by Ethno participants. In this form of collaboration, one person chooses a tune and then sends a recording via email to the collaborators. The collaborators use this recording as a basis when recording themselves performing the tune. They then send their recording to an editor, who puts all of the recordings together. For the organizers of the Hope Sessions, there were concerns that this type of collaboration would require needing to select people to participate, challenging the aim of inclusivity and accessibility (Mason, Interview, May 2020). Mason felt that these forms of recording lead to selectivity. They may also prevent people without access to recording equipment from engaging with the opportunity. Participating in a live session where everyone can hear each other was also recognised as simply ‘not working’ due to people being based in so many different time zones and the lag in ‘live sound’ between computers.

Upon reflection it was the conclusion of the organizers that the Hope Sessions were providing the most inclusive opportunity possible considering the context they were working in. One of the most significant advantages of online communities is accessibility and the freedom of access to information (Miller, 2012; Schippers and Grant, 2016; Waldron, 2018). Whilst the Hope Sessions may not have provided the live collaborations that participants were familiar with, the recognition by the organizers that inclusivity and accessibility were more important appears to fall in line with previous academic research into online communities (Miller, 2012; Schippers and Grant, 2016; Waldron, 2018). This decision has also provided an opportunity for Ethno to reach a wider audience.

The Hope Sessions have enabled people who do not know about Ethno to have the opportunity to participate in videos and learn about the musical practice. One facilitator described how the videos reached people in her region who had not heard of Ethno before because she was sharing the sessions through her Facebook page (Annya, Interview, May 2020). Another facilitator, an established folk musician, explained how he shared his session through his Fan page, again reaching out to people who may know him but are new to Ethno (Andrik, Interview, June 2020). Furthermore, as the sessions are free and can be accessed from home, the videos reach people who may not be able to afford to attend the Ethno gatherings. One participant stated:

It’s a very good opportunity for everyone, wherever you are, just to open the live video and watch and play along. And it is a very easy and beautiful thing to do, now. I think we really have to appreciate the opportunity that we have (Eliise, Interview, May 2020).

### **6.3 Online engagement and intercultural exchange**

Intercultural connection and exchange are described as an essential aspect of the gatherings, primarily because of the friendships that are built (Higgins, 2020a). The previous sections have demonstrated the need to shift the practice due to being in a new online environment. The shift to an online session has also brought a deep reflection on what intercultural exchange means within the community, demonstrating how a change in context may impact a conceptualisation of a practice (Schippers and Grant, 2016). Advik (Interview, June 2020) notes that they attempted to ensure that they always had people presenting from different continents. He felt that ‘through the sessions, it will open

their minds more to that different culture'. Therefore, from his perspective, the sessions provide an opportunity to expose people to a variety of different musical cultures.

One of the facilitators describes how an Ethno session impacted him in precisely this manner. Upon watching a session by an Indian singer, he found that some of the things she said 'helped me to find some other materials in the internet related to the way they see these local things in production of voice [...] so I got hooked for several days on some other channels on YouTube talking about Indian music.' (Andrik, Interview, June 2020) Therefore, the Hope Sessions do appear to be providing the opportunity to be introduced to music from different parts of the world with some musicians then exploring what has been learned further.

The decision to juxtapose a number of representatives from different countries alongside one another raises some of the concerns in the literature regarding the Eurocentric approach behind interculturalism as this highlights the difference between cultures, a notion born out of Europe's colonial history (Aman, 2013; Mantie and Risk, 2020; Nakayama, 2020). However, what is interesting is the organizer's understanding of intercultural exchange and how it was first impacted through his love for music. Advik explained that there are 'issues' between the Muslim and Indian community and how, as a child, he was restricted from engaging with Muslim people and taught to stay away because they were not from the same culture. This influenced his attitude towards Muslim people. He explained how he started to listen to Arabic music and how much he loved it, and how, 'slowly, slowly, this cultural thing from my mind [was] just gone'. He now has many Muslim friends and will attend the mosque even though he is a Hindu. He explained, 'I never thought I would enter a Muslim temple [...] but I think this has happened because of music'. (Advik, Interview, June 2020)

Whilst at a surface level it does appear that intercultural exchange during the Hope Sessions is being presented through a colonial lens, for the organizer it is related to his personal experience that led to a profound shift in his understanding of a culture different to his own. From his perspective, exposing people to music from other parts of the world is the first step to 'opening minds' to a new culture. It highlights the importance of moving beyond Eurocentric views of issues when it comes to engaging in diverse cultural understandings (Schippers, 2010; Schippers and Grant, 2016), and, as Bartleet argues, the vital importance of continual reflection of issues of power in intercultural exchanges (Bartleet, 2019).

A second issue that arose through the shift to an online platform was the difference between formal and informal exchange. Mason (Interview, May 2020) explained,

if you're having an intercultural experience within a formal context that feels very different from having an intercultural discussion in a face-to-face friendly kind of way [...] you don't get to ask those kinds of stupid questions that reveal the underlying assumptions that our culture has.

Intercultural exchange, where participants were engaged in conversations that deepen understandings of different cultural assumptions and perspectives, frequently occurred in informal settings during the camps. These were unfacilitated sessions, usually during late-night conversations or at the dinner table. Active, mediated sessions exploring intercultural understanding were not regular occurrences (Mantie and Risk, 2020). ; Montalbán, Llorrente and Zurita (2020) note a similar occurrence in their research into a mobility programme. Both examples highlight a problematic intercultural exchange issue: the lack of facilitation or reflection (Aman, 2013; Bartleet, 2019). The transition to a method of engagement that requires more formal encounters may be an opportunity for Ethno to consider intercultural exchange in a manner that enables some facilitated opportunities for reflection and guidance. This approach may enable deeper connections and friendships within the Ethno network. As Mason (Interview, May 2020) concluded, this period of isolation has given the

Ethno community time to think about what we are now in the twenty-first century. The pedagogy is very similar to 1990, but this allows us to sit for a second and say, okay, what do these new technologies give us, and what would it look like if we had an Ethno digital?

The closure of borders and subsequent cancellations of Ethno gatherings appears to have resulted in a re-evaluation of the deeper values of Ethno, potentially enabling the organisation to adapt more effectively to the changing needs of wider society and remain sustainable into the twenty-first century.

## 7. Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that a musical practice is impacted by the environment in which it takes place. To make these claims, we have drawn upon research into the Hope Sessions to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic has recontextualized musical practice. This is evidenced by how the Hope Sessions impacted artistic leader's understanding of their facilitation practices, allowing them the opportunity for self-development during a period when many musicians were concerned for their future. The research also demonstrated how the Hope Sessions gave rise to some reflection on the nature of intercultural exchange within Ethno and provided some opportunity for organizers to recontextualize Ethno in the twenty-first century, particularly with regard to improving intercultural exchange and therefore strengthening social connections within their network. Whilst the Hope Sessions enabled some connection between participants, they also provided the opportunity to reach out to people who are not familiar with the gatherings, expanding the Ethno-network further.

The Hope Sessions<sup>[7]</sup> initial intention was to provide 'hope and connection' for Ethno participants during social isolation. This meant supporting the wellbeing of the Ethno community during social isolation by connecting online through the Hope Sessions and providing inspiration for those that may be struggling. What became apparent through the research was that the music making occurring through the Hope Sessions was leading to new avenues of self-development and agency for musicians who rely on Ethno for income as artistic leaders. Therefore, the Ethno community used music during social isolation to improve wellbeing through self-development, demonstrating how a musician's web of artistic practice adjusts to an environmental situation (Coessens, 2014). Musicians, recognising that face-to-face encounters were not possible, found that opportunities for deeper understandings of musical practice were available and used the Hope Sessions for this purpose instead, resulting in the musical experience supporting self-development (Perkins, et al, 2020).

The rapid closure of borders and the sudden need for Ethno to adapt to the new situation is seen by many of the people that were interviewed as an opportunity, rather than a problem, revealing a sense of self-efficacy that may lead to future impactful social initiatives (Bandura, 1995). Before the COVID-19 lockdown, there were already concerns within the community about environmental climate change and the level of travelling needed to attend Ethno gatherings. The lockdown brought awareness of the opportunity to 'go to India, or New Zealand just by opening our computer or telephone' without needing to pay for a plane ticket (Eliise, Interview, May 2020). Therefore, the change in context and construct within the Ethno ecosystem appears to have been a positive opportunity for the practice's recontextualization. This supports Schippers and Grant's (2016: 336-37) assertion that 'recontextualization allows a genre to be repositioned [...] in that sense recontextualization is an asset rather than a weakness'. The Hope Sessions reveal a musical practice as it responds to a potentially devastating global event in a resilient manner, highlighting some of the programme's deeper values, such as choosing an inclusive and accessible approach over methods that enable collaborative opportunities.

More broadly, this research further unpicks understandings of intercultural exchange. The COVID-19 pandemic may be heralding future health challenges that impact society on a global scale. This means that effective intercultural exchange and connection may become more vital. The view of presenting music from various parts of the world side by side is already challenged in the literature as an

example of Eurocentric colonisation (Aman, 2013). The shift to the Hope Sessions has drawn attention to what intercultural exchange might look like on an online platform. Online interactions challenge human capacity for exchange as most people are unfamiliar with behavioural cues and patterns when engaging through a computer screen rather than in person. Online intercultural exchange may provide opportunities for new and unexpected forms of exchange providing one allows for the connectivity of all people and not simply the privileged few (Nakayama, 2020; Waldron, 2018; Miller, 2012). This in turn, may lead towards conceptions of intercultural exchange that move beyond a Eurocentric understanding and enhance the wellbeing of society through healthy social connections.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> <https://jmi.net/about>

<sup>ii</sup> Ethno India Final Concert 2020 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_fGmP-b\\_k0&t=8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_fGmP-b_k0&t=8s)

<sup>iii</sup> Ethno World is the umbrella term used to describe all the activities. Ethno World aims to 'revive, invigorate and disseminate global traditional musical heritage and to promote ideals such as peace tolerance and understanding' (Ethno-World, N.D.)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Ethno/>

<sup>v</sup> Artistic mentor is the name given to those that lead and facilitate the music activities.

<sup>vi</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=Ethno+World+YouTube+page%5D](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Ethno+World+YouTube+page%5D)

<sup>vii</sup> The names of all the interviewees have been anonymized for this article.

<sup>viii</sup> See the Ethno Pilot Case studies <https://www.ethnoresearch.org/publications/>

<sup>ix</sup> This is contrary to the typical role of communal music during the two world wars, that seeks to forge intimacy, connection, and an 'escape' from daily living's hardships (Flam, 1992; Rogers, 2016, Gibson, 2018).

<sup>x</sup> For greater detail into the impact the pedagogical shift from offline to online musical teaching and learning has had within Ethno, see Gibson, 2021.