

## **Musical Careers in Constant Crises** **An Asynchronous Dialogue from Tehran to Athens, via Belfast and Vienna**

Hadi Bastani, Anna Linardou, Rojin Sharafi and Ioannis Tsioulakis

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Article abstract

COVID-19 has caused an unprecedented crisis for performing musicians globally. But how are these new circumstances perceived by musicians in localities that have gone through multiple crises in the recent past? This article unfolds as a dialogue between two academics and two musicians from Greece and Iran, touching on issues of precarity, creativity, capitalism, state support and control, and radical ideas for a post-COVID cultural economy. Reflecting on conditions of economic crisis (Greece) and sanctions and military tensions (Iran), we argue that a return to 'normalcy' post-COVID is neither feasible nor desired by most musicians outside of institutional elites. By examining the experiences of musicians in the periphery of global markets and artistic circulation, we enrich the analysis of these unprecedented circumstances, but also find well-established coping strategies and seeds of resistance.

## **Musical Careers in Constant Crises: An Asynchronous Dialogue from Tehran to Athens, via Belfast and Vienna**

**Hadi Bastani, Anna Linardou, Rojin Sharafi, and Ioannis Tsioulakis**

### **Introduction**

#### ***Points of Departure***

“What is the ‘normality’ we wish to come back to?” This critical question, posed by composer and vocalist Anna Linardou in the discussion that follows, is at the centre of this article. Dumbfounded, socially isolated, and anxious—as artists, scholars, and human beings—in this unfolding crisis, we are struggling to grasp and reflect on past, present, and potential radical futures. Not only for the performing arts, but for society as a whole or, perhaps more realistically, in its manifestation through myriad—if interconnected—fragmentations.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown measures implemented by governments to curb the immediate effects on health and human life have had a profound effect on the ways in which we create and participate in culture. The overnight closure of performance venues and arts spaces, as well as the cancellation of musical events, has had a disproportionately devastating effect on freelance cultural workers (Tsioulakis and FitzGibbon; Banks). Even though the roll-out of a vaccine is on the horizon as this article is being written, and national governments are implementing modest plans to protect workers and cultural industries, it is becoming increasingly clear that the economic and social fallout of the pandemic will be deep and lengthy (Gopinath). As the COVID-19 pandemic is set to uproot and redefine production-consumption habits in different parts of the world, professional musicians and music networks struggle to discover new mechanisms to perform and monetise music collectively. Such efforts inevitably involve a radical restructuring at the level of presentation of musical material and the space/place in which we gather in physical proximity to share an experience of musicking.

However, even before these dire circumstances, the lives of professional musicians and cultural workers more generally were marked by intensified precarity (Tsioulakis, *Musicians in Crisis*; Scharff; Lorey, “Virtuosos of Freedom”). In certain places, the novel circumstances caused by COVID-19 are a mere exacerbation of previous predicaments; they are a pile-up of crises and crashes under the capitalist market economy. Freelance musicians in Greece have seen their careers subjected to intense precarity as a result of the infamous economic crisis and the imposition of a decade of austerity. This new emergency thus faces an already weakened profession, but also an “experienced precariat” (Tsioulakis, *Musicians in Crisis*). In Iran, the experimental electronic music scene (EEMSI) was weakened due to new economic sanctions, military tensions in the region, and ever-worsening diplomatic battles following Donald Trump’s policy of “maximum pressure.” The COVID-19 pandemic, however, seems to have offered the largely independent, grassroots, DIY, and tech-savvy network of Iranian experimental musicians (Bastani) a new incentive to resume their activities.

#### ***Who Are We, and What Are We Trying to Do?***

The four contributors to this piece are musicians and researchers, with legacies within creative scenes in Greece and Iran, but also filtered through migrant experiences in the UK and Austria. Hadi Bastani is a sound artist, composer, and anthropologist based at Queen’s University Belfast. His sound-based practice engages with field recording, synthesis, and spatial audio in

the context of immersive compositions, installations, and improvised performances. His academic research explores the relationship between creative practice, digital technologies, and formation of new modes of sociality within popular music and sound studies. Through a focus on politics of material flows of cultural production, he has investigated an experimental electronic music scene in Iran from disciplinary perspectives of (collaborative) sonic arts and anthropology. Anna Linardou is an Athens-based vocalist and teacher. Her field of interest is the mixing of vocal styles and free improvisation. Her performance work varies from contemporary opera to improvised, world, and jazz music projects. Rojin Sharafi is a Vienna-based Iranian sound artist, composer, and sound engineer. Her broader repertoire includes pieces for acoustic, electro-acoustic, and electronic music. She also collaborates with dancers, music ensembles, and filmmakers as a composer/performer and film scorer. Ioannis Tsioulakis is an ethnomusicologist at Queen's University Belfast, as well as an ensemble director, arranger, and pianist. His research focuses on popular music in Greece, with an emphasis on session musicians, creative labour, and the Greek economic and political crisis.

The intersections of differences and similarities between the profiles of the four contributors are what we see as a key strength of bringing our voices together. All of us originate from cultures that exist within liminal spaces of musical and capitalist circulation, places that can be conceptualised as “margins.” Yet, the “de/territorialisation” (Inda and Rosaldo 14) that emerges as a result of global capitalism also ensures that cosmopolitan cultural consumption is possible (if uneven) for those who can afford it. In that sense, it is worth acknowledging that—through merit of our musical education, social class, and practical experience—the contributors have also enjoyed privileges of access, opportunity, and technological means that set us apart from some of our compatriots. Still, our migratory patterns from “peripheries” (Iran, Greece) to “centres” (UK, Austria) have also introduced precarities and inequalities that have seasoned the voices and views represented in this text.

The current piece was developed as an asynchronous conversation between the four contributors, over a few weeks in June and July 2020. We set out to explore a range of questions around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the creative lives of performing musicians, touching on issues around precarity, creativity, networking, state support/control, and ideas for a post-COVID cultural economy. We did this by adding comments (some short, some quite long) on a shared document, which were then edited for clarity and were slightly restructured to create somewhat of a flow for the outside reader. As the unfolding of the conversation below will show, the themes of the dialogue early enough veered away from a focused statement on the current pandemic and towards a wider reflection on making music—or even simply existing—in conditions of neoliberal capitalism. In reading over and editing this conversation, we resisted the urge to “discipline” the text into absolute conformity with the initial objective, because we feel that this is the whole point: COVID-19 is neither unrelated nor impervious to the predicaments of capitalism for creative artists, or humans more widely. As political philosopher Isabell Lorey has powerfully argued, workers in the creative industries are “virtuosos of freedom” who often “consider themselves entirely critical of society” (“Virtuosos of Freedom” 84), but who are also conditioned and victimised by the precarity and vulnerability that comes with freelance work in neoliberal capitalism.

## Conversation

**Rojin Sharafi (RS):** During the pandemic, reflecting has become a new part of my daily routine. When I start reflecting, I can pause my hamster wheel. Career-wise, I ask myself: What is this game in which I am taking part? Am I reproducing myself? Am I reproducing someone else? What values have I accepted to be able to play? What does it mean to get further in your career

as a performing artist? How can we support freelancers in situations like a pandemic? Should I invest more time on post-production projects where I work as sound engineer rather than composer/performer? What are the financial resources that we have as performers? What could they be like in the next thirty years?

It's a privilege to have time to be creative. If I want to be creative, I need to have control over my day and rely on my intuition. I need to put myself in a special state and to choose what I watch, listen to, and consume. When I'm on my hamster wheel I am less sensitive and less creative. I experienced that privilege during COVID-19, while living in my flat in Vienna. I started some new collaborations. Some of them were like dream projects that came true. For example, working on a music video with my best friend from high school.<sup>1</sup> Other collaborations were completely surprising ones, and they have been afforded by an era when people have time to think about new possibilities.

There is a good side to the COVID-19 lockdown in terms of mental health: having more time for myself and having the opportunity to rest! Reminding myself of my privileges. Having the feeling of living a good life, where I can care for myself: doing sports, meditating, and eating healthy food. But there is also a bad side: loneliness. Missing human contact! Worrying about my parents and friends in Tehran and for my younger sister in France. Missing my friends and family and the uncertainty of when I can visit them again. Financial worries.

**Ioannis Tsioulakis (IT):** These are thought-provoking ideas, Rojin. I'm interested in the idea of the "hamster wheel," especially in relation to creativity and independence. When do you feel most that you are on a "hamster wheel"? Does it relate to working for others as opposed to yourself? Does it depend on whether you call the shots for a particular creative project or if you are hired to complete a specific task? In my experience and research with professional musicians in Greece, I found that many use the dichotomy of "work vs. play," whereby if they "work," their criteria are about how good the working conditions and payment are, whereas if they "play" (e.g. being creative), their main preoccupations are about the quality of the result and process (but economic concerns might also come into play there).<sup>2</sup>

**RS:** I feel like I'm on a hamster wheel when I do lots of projects for financial survival or for what I think is necessary for my career. I don't have a problem with commissioned work or working for others per se, but when I have commissioned projects it's very hard and exhausting to develop my own projects at the same time. I can relate to this "work vs play" concept. I also work as sound engineer for music and film productions. For me, working in that field is "work" while working on my electronic music production and gigs can be more defined as "play." Another challenge for freelancers is that you need to have various abilities and you need to always be good at all of them. For example, this is a list of the jobs I had in July alone:

- Teaching a workshop about sound synthesis
- Doing sound design and mixing for a seventy-minute-long film
- Doing two mixtapes (not paid well)
- Playing four concerts, one of which is a collaboration with a dancer

**IT:** If the COVID-19 pandemic has given you some privilege to be more creative, is that something that we can learn from? Is it a state that can be maintained post-COVID-19, and how would the music industry/scenes need to change to accommodate that? Would, for example, a Universal Basic Income be a good idea for musicians, or do you think that it's more a question of making more funding available for particular projects?

**TS:** A Universal Basic Income is a great idea, which musicians in Austria are also demanding. What I miss in the Austrian music community is a conversation among musicians. Gathering, talking, having panel discussions about the problems we are facing. Also, discussions about diversity and discrimination. It would be great if a platform was built around these concerns in order to ensure that funding allocation is fair. This could also propose routes for funding that are more relevant to current musicians and artists. I also think that through unionisation there might be ways to bring positive change.

**Hadi Bastani (HB):** I have survived until the age of thirty-four all by freelancing and have “just” managed so far to pay my bills and have a couple of extra bucks for a cup of coffee. As a former refugee, I have lived and worked in the margins of the capitalist market economy as a “parasite”—in the sense used by Michel Serre in his 1982 book *The Parasite*—meaning, in my case, as an organism not fully integrated in the system, yet managing to survive (mostly in subsistence form) by finding ways of feeding from it. Of course, getting fed is a non-negotiable necessity for all sentient beings. But getting fed while not getting tangled in the hamster-wheel or in games we don’t know or are suspicious of, as Rojin has put it, demands a great deal of dynamic critical ability and willingness to change.

**Anna Linardou (AL):** When the lockdown was announced, I saw it as a good excuse for the first real break in my working life. During the first three weeks, I realized that I had a strong need for silence. I didn’t feel like singing, practicing, creating. I just wanted to read and use silence to understand and reflect on the new reality and how that was being shaped globally. I felt worried and annoyed by a wave of cheap optimism that was promoted through the mass media and the wish often expressed by popular artists and politicians for a return to normality. Because what many people may consider “normality” is profoundly problematic and responsible not only for the COVID-19 pandemic, but also for past and future crises.

**RS:** I think individualism has taken over our lives and is serving capitalism with or without our awareness. In situations like a pandemic, it becomes clearer that individualism is the enemy of public health. The pandemic reminds us to take care of others and to know our privileges. But that’s only the beginning of realising issues of intersectionality and acting on them. Empathy is not enough; we need action. This has been a clear demand since the Black Lives Matter movement went mainstream in the past few months.

There are lots of disasters happening in different places, from financial crises to climate change-related catastrophes, natural disasters, wars, brutal systemic crackdown on protesters, and structural oppression of BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other minorities. These predicaments are experienced by people in different regions but are not happening to everyone at the same time. Even though this crisis was called “global,” different places were impacted differently by it. For instance, the recent Global Recession did not hit the Iranian economy as hard as some other economies that were more integrated into global markets. Iran has had, especially in the last 40 years, a very corrupt oil-based economy. But Iran’s economy was destroyed twice in the last decade, which mainly affected people of working and middle classes. These instances took place following economic sanctions (by the US and the EU) and encouraged Iran’s regime to strengthen their illegal trade networks. So, although economic inequality, structural poverty, and the existence of a wealthy 1% are global issues, the situation does not always feel like a “global crisis.” That’s what makes this pandemic unique. First, because it is truly global, and second, because nobody is safe! Seeing it through an intersectional approach, it is of course clear that social class, ethnicity, and other factors play an important role in how/if people stay safe. If there is no governmental support, who can survive without a job? Who is covered by the healthcare system? Freelancers are one of the most economically vulnerable groups, but there are people

that are simultaneously freelancers *and* students, or freelancers *and* non-national citizens, or freelancers *and* trans . . .

**AL:** A pandemic is not only a natural phenomenon. It is a social phenomenon too, very much dependant on economy, culture, and daily life. What is the normality we wish to come back to? Our insistence on recklessly modifying the environment and ruining the balance of ecosystems will become more and more life-threatening for our species. If we really want to talk about this, let's talk sincerely. COVID-19 is surely a very dangerous virus. But Capital is the real pandemic, and it is totally out of control.

**IT:** This connects nicely to what Rojin talks about above in relation to “individuality” in capitalism and the impact that the pandemic has had on the most vulnerable and precarious. This “return to normality” might be the mantra for some who were happy with the previous system (capitalists, wealthy states, perhaps an exploitative music industry) but not for freelancers or working people more generally. But are there dangers in seeing this moment as an “opportunity”? This language risks to normalise even more the dominance of big Capital that demands from us to embrace precarity, as it happened for example with the Greek “Crisis.”<sup>3</sup> In terms of music as a domain of work (both creative and economic), what are the opportunities for demolishing established systems in favour of fairer ones, rather than deepening the fury of control over the precarious?

**AL:** I started working as an artist in 2008, when the global debt crisis broke out. The austerity measures imposed in Greece caused economic and social destruction: economic shrinkage, migration, suicides, unemployment, and a demolition of working and social rights, comparable to a war. Greek artists have been experiencing a constant deterioration of working opportunities and conditions for more than ten years now. The economic crisis has caused an unprecedented contraction of the concert industry and even very popular artists, with whom I was working at the beginning of my career, had to adapt abruptly to a very uncertain, pressing, and restrictive working reality.

Simultaneously, diverse underground music activity started blossoming and many new, small music communities were created. However, despite the (in many cases) high artistic value of this music production, the artists most often did not manage to claim professional standards in terms of fees, resources, and networks. Very few of them managed to perform outside the country, since operating from Greece is much more difficult and expensive than being based in Central or Northern Europe, and that is a serious deficit in a highly competitive business. Northern and Central European colleagues often ask me about state support. It is zero. None. So, before COVID-19 arrived, creative musicians were already struggling to create and connect in a highly competitive international environment and with a total absence of state support.

The recent lockdown and the safety measures that seem like they will be long-lasting have dramatically decreased the possibility of live concerts, especially for the less commercial genres of music that address smaller audiences in smaller venues. I am very worried about the very few venues left hosting creative music in Athens. It is doubtful whether they will survive since they won't be able to host viable concerts for as long as the COVID-19 crisis goes on. That means that the most vivid, aware, and creative part of music performance will be muted.

So, COVID-19 is just accelerating a process that began about a decade ago as part of the economic crisis in Greece. This process is transforming artistic performance from a profession including people of different social origins, a profession that could provide a decent livelihood to its workers, into a hobby of luxury, a privilege of the elite, only those who can afford it. As

governments keep prioritizing productivity and efficiency, which in other words is no more than a “reasonable” rate of capital reproduction, our perception of creativity will become more and more distorted under the neoliberal prism, as will be the context and purpose of art. I believe that art is a political act, regardless of the direct or indirect intention of the artists. So, its transformation into a privilege is a serious issue of democracy.

**IT:** There is an interesting tension here between the different roles that people (and that includes musicians, institutions, academics, and “consumers”) attach to the concept of “art” (that often excludes the “artist”). To put it simply, audiences and stakeholders outside of the small minority of musicians who produce music *for a living* are more preoccupied with supporting “art” than supporting “artists.” Many might agree that art—especially in times of Crisis—is necessary for expression, mental health, solidarity, and so on, but where does that leave those who rely on art as a means of putting food on the table? This is very evident in the immediate response of some artists in the wake of COVID-19 who started hosting free online events, making their music freely available to anyone. As Anna puts it, this draws a sharp divide that is about inequality: artmaking becomes a luxury only for those who can afford it without depending on it financially; ultimately art as an elite domain. This has implications not only for who can make art, but also on what kind of art is being made and whose story it tells. Music-making has always been an exclusive club (thinking especially of intersectional exclusions, as Rojin articulates earlier, depending on race, gender, class, ability . . . the list is endless). But here lies a potential threshold: the COVID-19 emergency seems on course to make performing arts even more exclusive, especially if funding and initiatives are based on “productivity” (what happens, for example, to those artists who care for children, vulnerable others, or themselves?). Are there ways of seizing the circumstances to demolish some of the institutions that produce some of these inequalities? For example, should we be campaigning for funds *not* to be directed to—or managed by—established arts institutions, but to take the opportunity to stand against them through other grassroots collectives?

**AL:** Your last question, Ioannis, is something often discussed among colleagues. According to my experience though, being politically “progressive” is something separate from being artistically “progressive.” The most politically conscious and radical part of society, which forms collectives that do have “a great deal of dynamic critical ability and willingness to change,” as Hadi very well put it, despite their insightful critique of capitalism and its ideological mechanisms (art included), show an attitude towards the art of music that is very limited and often extremely conservative. If you look at the musical programme of the anticapitalist youth festivals in Greece,<sup>4</sup> for instance, you will see *rebetiko* music from the thirties to the fifties, traditional repertoire from the Greek Left movement of the sixties and seventies, and commercial songs labelled as “music of the working class” (*laiki*) or “art-song” (*éntekno*), represented by commercially successful and fully integrated artists. I believe that grassroots collectives could be a powerful means of intervention in the social space, on the condition that there be a critical mass of artistic and political vanguard. More democratic structures are needed, but structures themselves do not guarantee essential changes. There must also be a wider intention towards re-shaping society, as Hadi said.

**HB:** To create a demand in a particular area, let’s say to support freelance musicians, there need to be “voices” that cut through sharply, to *disrupt* in the most radical sense of the term. As such, things get inevitably tangled, especially in a democratic system, with the black magic of politics: changing the world by convincing others or forcing them to accept a new definition of what’s “good” or “necessary.” This is, however, not possible without forming new alliances with the “elites” who are willing to align themselves, for their own varied interests (political, financial, ideological, etc.), with the demands of the movement.

**AL:** Regarding grassroots collectives and alliances with part of the “elite,” we should keep in mind that capitalism has an endless, powerful integrating ability that can turn even the protest against it into a new field of commerce and capital-generating activity. History has given us many examples of how capitalism integrates antisystemic movements in order to disarm them. We had a recent, very painful experience in Greece with the alliance of anticapitalist, radical collectives with the reformists of SYRIZA (many of its high-ranking executives and supporters were representing the more “progressive” sections of the elite) which finally led to the ravaging of the anticapitalist movement and the absolute dominance of neoliberalism and social conservatism.<sup>5</sup> I am afraid that the condition for more marginal artists to be represented within the existing financial and social structure is that they contribute to financial growth. In such a conjunction, there can be some appetite for “alternative” products coming from the margins. In periods of crises and recession, however, when colossal industries are shaking and the capitalist rivalry increases, the margins are crushed like ants in a fight between elephants. Marginal “products” are not appealing for elite alliances unless they can somehow strengthen their elite status.

**HB:** I wonder if this observation is lost in Western Europe and the US (even among the “progressives”). Yes, movements consistently grow in the margins and move towards the centre. But in doing so, they increasingly get integrated into an economic and ideological network of liberal capitalism, which they, in turn, legitimise aesthetically. The only way out should be thought of as a sharp theoretical *exit*. At the level of practice, however, it must take place gradually and with proper planning in order to minimise the danger of psychological polarisation and psychosis. To exit, we need to creatively re-evaluate our “desires”: the same desires that are continuously (re-)shaped by the system. And that’s how, for me, change gets tangled with human agency in the most radical sense. We should begin to imagine new forms of social interaction; new forms of relating to “matter,” technology, desire, and the world, outside and beyond a competitive network of financial capital growth perpetuation. If competition is so deeply ingrained in our “nature,” maybe we should find new areas for competition that function outside and beyond the capitalist desire machine.

**IT:** The quest for an “exit” is a big discourse among the musicians “in crisis” with whom I have been working (see Tsioulakis, *Musicians in Crisis*). It reminds me of the work of political philosopher Isabell Lorey, who talks about “exodus” as a resistance to the promise of a “better future” through participation in presentist forms—and not insignificantly ones that include performance and collectivity (“Presentist Democracy”). While engaging in this exercise of imagining creativity beyond (or outside) capitalism, however, we need to acknowledge that even the bare thought of such a possibility entails a degree of privilege. Many of our colleagues or compatriots would refrain from this kind of post/anti-capitalist imaginary, not only because of ideological disagreement, but also because they might not have the luxury to exit a system that provides them with the means to survive, in hope of a more equitable future. That said, the recent radicalisation and collectivity that is emerging within the field of performing artists in Greece suggests that such ideas might be a lot more ripe than we previously suspected (Tsioulakis, “How Greek Musicians Weathered an Economic Crisis”). With that in mind, I think there are two major advantages in forging paths towards such an “exit” among the contributors here: the first is music/sound and the second is the role of the “periphery.”

The characteristic that makes music (and more widely performance) hard to establish and safeguard as “labour” is its elusiveness. It can be “owned” (and hence should be compensated for) but at the same time, once iterated, it is to an extent common. In a more political sense, it forges *commons* (or “multitudes,” as Lorey has it, drawing on the political philosophy of Paolo Virno). Perhaps this could serve as a starting point for a post-COVID resistance to the



conglomerates that control music circulation. Not a music that is necessarily free for consumption—which, as we have already argued, privileges those who *still* profit from it (thinking of the large online/media giants)—but rather music that is shared through intimacies between participants, in forms that are controlled by them. This goes well with Anna’s idea of grassroots collectives of intervention.

The “periphery” is also important here. Drawing from places such as Greece and Iran, where the dominance of global capitalism unfolds in asymmetrical and uneven ways, we might see these opportunities for disruption more clearly. In other words, the liminal placement of Greece and Iran in cultural and historical crossroads that create an ambiguous relationship to the globalist force of capitalism (Tsing), makes them territories to watch with increased interest. Again, thinking of the re-ignition of musical interaction post-COVID-19, in contexts where free-market economics are rampant, we are likely to see responses that prioritise the use of creative industries as a boost to profit that rarely finds its way to struggling artists. However, artists in Greece and Iran, who are used to dealing with crises and finding ways to cope outside them—often parasitically, as Hadi argues—might be the ones to keep an eye on for ideas of alternative action. This is not to say, of course, that many of our colleagues and research interlocutors might not be envious of those operating within the centres of capitalist production and “growth.” After all, our own migratory patterns show that in such established “centres,” opportunities might be more readily available for careers in both research and music. However, the potential for grassroots resistance and the toolkit to make it radically transformative are more likely to exist within “crisis-scapes” (Brekke et al.).

**HB:** I think Rojin is right in noticing that recent recessions (2008 and 2020) did not hit Iran as hard as some other countries because of its relative independence from the capitalist market economy. Although the Iranian economy is in no shape to offer a viable model for exit, it does suggest that a certain degree of independence from networks of capitalist market economy can translate into higher degrees of resilience towards inevitably recurring crashes that are built into the kind of (exponential) “growth” that these markets experience. I want to use this to reflect on some of the post-COVID-19 developments of an experimental electronic music scene in Iran (EEMSI), to which both Rojin’s and my work are in different ways related.

EEMSI’s contact with the mainstream music industry is minimal. There is an anti-mainstream sentiment inherent to what EEMSI does, which has often been strongly voiced by my interlocutors in the field. This ethos is the result of a dual mistrust, on the one hand in capitalism in general, and on the other in the national government’s politics and some of broader society’s ethics. EEMSI, as such, is a marginal voice in Iran—a country that is itself located somewhat at the peripheries of capitalist market economy, as noted earlier. To survive in such circumstances, the scene heavily relies on collectively coordinated practice rooted in a strong sense of affinity among members: a small crowd of passionate and tech-savvy individuals gathered together in DIY collectives based on their shared background, friendship, and interests (Samuels and Bastani). It is also necessary to open a parenthesis here and note that EEMSI’s activities, at least those that have found some exposure through media, are the hard-earned result of the work undertaken by individuals who, financially, have already been in a relatively more affluent position, as mainly middle-class producers, compared to Iranian society at large.

While the current recession is damaging many musical careers around the world, parts of EEMSI seem to be revitalised in a strange way. EEMSI was under a lot of economic pressure since the return of US sanctions, following the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the JCPOA (aka the Iranian Nuclear Deal) in May 2018. For around two years, until May 2020, EEMSI’s activities were significantly reduced, particularly inside the country. SET Experimental

Arts Events and TADAEX, the two most-known platforms for experimental electronic music and new media arts in Iran, had to cancel all their main events—well, at least until the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country. Although, as a relatively more economically integrated digital art and experimental electronic music platform, TADAEX has remained largely inactive, SET began a new performance series entirely in the cyberspace.<sup>6</sup> This new series involved more than 30 livestreamed performances by Iranian and non-Iranian artists, including: Hesam Ohadi (aka Idlefon), Kate Carr, Arash Akbari, Rutger Zuydervelt (aka Machinefabriek), Ramtin Niazi, William Fields, Hüma Utku, Zoë McPherson, Arash Pandi, Alireza Poorsohoolat (aka Mez’Rab), Rojin Sharafi, Niamké Désiré (aka Aho Ssan), Pouya Ehsaei, and NUM (Milad Bagheri and Maryam Sirvan), among others. Noise-à-Noise—an independent and DIY record label based in Tehran—also continued their activities with a noticeably renewed passion during the pandemic period. During this period alone, they have released one album and two compilation series, which constitute one-third of all the label releases since their launch in 2018.<sup>7</sup>

Such occurrences have not been limited to EEMSI. Disco Tehran—a live performance series and party organiser based in New York—has recently (on July 24, 2020) announced an upcoming virtual musical event: a new party. Participants will take part as avatars inside the hugely popular video game Minecraft, free of charge. All they need to do will be to download Minecraft Bedrock on their phone or game console, and to enter the link provided on Disco Tehran’s Instagram page.<sup>8</sup> Such initiatives have been taking place, but it seems that COVID-19 has accelerated them for obvious reasons. Rojin has also recently (on July 27, 2020) performed as part of a similar event called Turn Us Alias—“a 24-hour music and video game festival starting on July 25 2020”<sup>9</sup>—organised on Minetest, an open-source infinite world block sandbox game engine<sup>10</sup> similar to Minecraft.

The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably accelerated certain processes of monetising creative practice via the cyberspace. This era is raising new questions with regards to our relationship to “musicking” in the broadest sense (Small). How will a musical practice/career in the post-COVID era be experienced/sensed? How will musical “space,” in the broadest sense of the term, be redefined? How will music be experienced in relation to “place”? How will new virtual architectures and psychoacoustics change our perception of musicking? How will new forms of sociality, taking shape around such new experiences, give rise to new musical subcultures? What will new politics of space, place, and music “look” like in the new era of accelerating digital “virtualisation”? All these questions now seem timelier than ever.

## Concluding Thoughts

Through the sharing of personal experiences and ruminations about life under different iterations of capitalism outside of “the West,” and despite different local backgrounds, intersectional experiences, and musical scenes, the contributors to this conversation have found common ground in articulating this extraordinary moment. This common ground, perhaps unsurprisingly, lays on the notion that the COVID-19 crisis may be unprecedented as a predicament in our lifetimes, yet its impact on our conduct is somewhat familiar. It is merely a new crisis in an already crowded “crisis-scape” (Brekke et al.). For musicians who have struggled through governmental measures of austerity, economic sanctions, censorship, the demolition of the welfare state, structural inequality, and intense precarisation, this latest crisis is faced with ideological consciousness, perhaps seasoned with a pinch of cynicism as well.

Also shared between the contributors here is a distrust in elite, top-down institutions (musical, governmental, or otherwise) in building improved cultural industries post-COVID-19. As artists, venues, cities, and nation-states re-emerge from the lockdown, it is tempting to rely on

established organisations to kickstart the creative economy, while musicians and other freelancers fight over leftover crumbs. However, we suggest that this is not a moment for a return to a misplaced feeling of “normality,” but rather a chance to forge new intimacies and alliances that provide ways out of subjugation and precarity. In this process, music/sound occupies a privileged position from which to resist the return to a perverse “normal,” in its capacity as an inimitable act, timely, visceral and embodied—as a performance that “resists the balanced circulations of finance” and that “saves nothing; it only spends” (Phelan 148). Finally, we suggest that voices from the “periphery”—outside of the established centres of cultural production, outside of the complete domination of global capitalism, and outside of the stereotypical profile of the creative artist—might have strategies at hand that are both ripe and urgent.

As a by-product of this conversation/exchange, the participants have also collaboratively produced a piece of electroacoustic music. The piece, titled *Freshair*, articulates the common ground between them through sound-/music-making and *listening*.<sup>11</sup> It is produced by Bastani from improvised material and short compositions by Sharafi, Linardou, and Bastani. The piece is based on improvised gibberish sung by Linardou. While the language of singing, form, and sonic choreography of the work imply a continuous sense of suspension and anticipation, *Freshair* offers a composite soundscape in which different modes of music-making come together to shape a coherent musical whole: we are heading nowhere, but *together*. It is this convergence of difference—different voices, modes of thinking, and doing—that *Freshair* as an electroacoustic piece seeks to highlight. Stylistic nuances can be heard as impossible/anachronistic entanglements of different sonic worlds—times, spaces, and places that in everyday “reality” may seem to not belong together. In so doing, it sketches out a quest for the possibility of a different future, one in which another crisis—this time “caused” by the Coronavirus—will have afforded us new “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari); new prospects of “escape,” in the sense that it was articulated in this text.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a teaser of this video, visit:

[https://www.instagram.com/p/CAak3X7AfG4/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CAak3X7AfG4/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link).

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the “work vs. play” dichotomy, see Tsioulakis, “Jazz in Athens,” “The Quality of Mutuality,” and *Musicians in Crisis*.

<sup>3</sup> For some analyses of “The Greek Crisis” in relation to poverty, precarity, creativity, and social unrest, see Athanasiou (“States of Emergency”); Dalakoglou, et al.; Tziovas; and Knight.

<sup>4</sup> The most prominent of those would be the festival of *KNE* (the youth wing of the Greek Communist Party) and the festival of SYRIZA youth (the left-wing party that was in power in Greece from 2015 until 2018). For an in-depth look at the musical politics of Greek left-wing parties, see Papadogiannis; Zaimakis.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of SYRIZA’s rise in power and its shortcomings, see Athanasiou, “The Performative Dialectics”; Chatzipanagiotidou and Tsioulakis; and Varoufakis.

<sup>6</sup> Visit SET’s page on Facebook for more detail: [www.facebook.com/setfesttehran](http://www.facebook.com/setfesttehran).

<sup>7</sup> See [noise-a-noise.bandcamp.com](https://noise-a-noise.bandcamp.com).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.instagram.com/discotehran.nyc/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/discotehran.nyc/?hl=en).

<sup>9</sup> See [www.instagram.com/saturnalia\\_festival](https://www.instagram.com/saturnalia_festival).

<sup>10</sup> Sandbox games incorporate elements of sandbox design: a range of game systems that encourage creative free play towards a goal specified by the game, or no goal at all.

<sup>11</sup> See [soundcloud.com/hadi-bastani/freshair/s-oTQHv1hU7Wc](https://soundcloud.com/hadi-bastani/freshair/s-oTQHv1hU7Wc).

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