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## Virtual Musicking During COVID-19: Maintaining a Music Ensemble Community

Daithí Kearney, Adèle Commins and Philip McGuinness

Dundalk Institute of Technology

Article Info.	Abstract
<p><u>Date Submitted:</u> August 2020</p> <p><u>Date Accepted:</u> May 2021</p> <p><u>Date Published:</u> September 2021</p>	<p>The propensity of choirs and music ensembles to support their members, develop social skills and nurture wellbeing is well documented but, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the possibility of such groups to come together to rehearse, perform and socialize was removed. This paper focuses on the Oriel Traditional Orchestra (OTO), a voluntary, intergenerational, cross-border community orchestra of approximately 80 members spread over four counties in the border region of the north-east of Ireland. This paper reflects on the feedback from two surveys with the ensemble, undertaken before and during the COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland. These surveys highlight the importance to the ensemble of developing a social network for members, their sense of community, and the link between social activities connected to participation in music-making and wellbeing. During the period of restrictions resulting from COVID-19 virtual engagement in musicking contributed to wellness and the wellbeing of members but a desire for face-to-face activities remained. The paper details how the OTO has responded to the crisis to support its members and continue its social role for members.</p>

Keywords: Virtual Musicking; Music and Wellbeing; Social Isolation; Irish traditional music; Intergenerational Orchestra

### 1. Introduction

This article responds to the actions and experiences related to the COVID-19 outbreak but is part of a broader research agenda in the Creative Arts Research Centre at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) on the connection between music ensembles, heritage and identity in Ireland that began in 2016. Research has been undertaken by academic researchers in collaboration with music groups and organisations, including the Oriel Traditional Orchestra (OTO), who are the subject of this paper. The broader research project has entailed the development of a longitudinal case study of a community orchestra and case studies of individual community organizations that make connections between arts activities and local heritage and identity.

Writing in the field of music education, Pitts (2005) articulates the extent to which musical participation can have positive emotional, social, and cognitive impacts on the lives of musicians and their wellbeing. Although this article focuses on activities that sought to engage members of the orchestra in continuing music-making during the lockdown period, it is recognized that playing and singing are not the only legitimate forms of ‘musicking’ (Small, 1998) and there are multiple modes of engagement with music in ‘everyday life’ (DeNora, 2000). During lockdown, many artists gave virtual performances and shared tutorial videos online. Likewise, many people who may have had more time to spare because of changes in lifestyle and employment due to restrictions were able to listen to, learn and record music that they may not normally have been able to. However, primary research conducted for this paper during COVID-19 indicates that the outbreak had a negative impact on engagement with music by members of the OTO, particularly their participation in music-making, which is the act of musicking from which they derive most enjoyment.

The activities of the OTO were curtailed by the rollout of restrictive measures in both jurisdictions from which members are drawn. On 12 March 2020, the Irish government published restrictive measures, which included the closure of schools, colleges and cultural institutions and cancellation of indoor gatherings of more than 100 people.<sup>1</sup> The British government announced restrictions on 20 March which included the closure of pubs.<sup>2</sup> The Irish Republic’s restrictions were increased in severity on 25 March.<sup>3</sup> The Northern Ireland devolved government imposed more severe restrictions on 28 March.<sup>4</sup> By the end of March, OTO rehearsals, informal gatherings and concerts had been cancelled for the foreseeable future.

While the focus of this article is on a virtual music-making activity involving performing remotely as part of an ensemble using technology, it recognizes the varied means of engagement by many people with the arts during COVID-19 and their desire for social interaction. In the context of this paper, the work of DeNora (2013) is important as she highlights that states of wellness and wellbeing are connected to encounters with others and opportunities for engaging in musicking. The intervention documented herein aspired to create social opportunities and connectivity and an artistic activity to sustain the energy of an orchestra with potential benefits for the wellbeing of members. Members of the orchestra engaged in various forms of musicking during lockdown. For some, responses indicate that the OTO was the principal outlet for musicking in their lives, regardless of COVID-19, and they were dependent, to some extent, on activities facilitated by the OTO during this period despite a proliferation of online resources and music events.

## 2. Methodology

This research seeks to learn from the experiences of OTO members and their online musical activities during the COVID-19 outbreak; document the experience and use of technology by a community orchestra; and identify opportunities for future projects that will support the members of community orchestras. Ethical approval was granted by Dundalk Institute of Technology for an initial survey in 2018 and extended in 2020 in order to further develop the research in response to COVID-19. The methodology involved two online surveys designed in consultation with the orchestra committee and circulated to members of the orchestra by their secretary. There were many open-ended questions that allowed members space to develop their answers. Information about the research project was included in communications about the survey and responses were anonymized with participation being voluntary on the part of members. The number of participants surveyed differed slightly for each survey, reflecting a slight change in membership (n=79; n=83) and there was an improved response rate from 25% to 41%. The survey data was analysed thematically by the researchers, then illustrated by direct quotations from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/coronavirus-schools-colleges-and-childcare-facilities-in-ireland-to-shut-1.4200977> last accessed 20/08/2020

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51981653> last accessed 20/08/2020

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rte.ie/news/politics/2020/0324/1124966-cabinet-coronavirus/> last accessed 20/08/2020

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/uk-northern-ireland-52075082> last accessed 20/08/2020

the transcripts (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006). The researchers are also active participants in the ensemble and can draw upon ethnographic experiences to inform their research and conclusions.

### 3. Literature Review

This paper draws on literature from music and health, community music, geography and music education and critically examines how musicking and participation in a music ensemble can enhance wellness and wellbeing for members. It is particularly influenced by literature engaging with Irish traditional music as this is the genre of music performed by the orchestra. This paper also refers to literature engaging in other genres and musical activities, notably choral singing. It recognizes the importance of place and regional identity in the construction of a community and assertion of an identity as well as the geographical factors that impact on the development of music ensembles. Like Finnegan, the researchers recognize that music groups often take names from localities (2007: 300) and this, in turn, creates identity and places these groups within a wider geography of Irish traditional music. Increasingly, a sense of place is linked to a sense of wellbeing (Poe, Donatuto and Satterfield, 2016; Kavanagh, 2019). This study also leans on ethnomusicologist Turino's work on music as social life and the politics of participation, recognising that the arts are 'fundamental to forming and sustaining social groups, which are, in turn, basic to survival' (2008: 2). COVID-19 has posed an existential threat to many groups, organisations and businesses and the response of ensembles has highlighted the desire amongst their members and their audiences for music-making during difficult times.

A strong theme to emerge from the primary research in this study related to the social impact and importance of participation in the OTO. A number of studies highlight the importance of social aspects of participating in a music ensemble or choir (Joseph and Southcott, 2014; Mantie, 2012; Kenny, 2016; Ernst, 2001). Social isolation is an important theme in the study of the lives of older people (Skingley & Bungay, 2010; Escuder-Mollon, 2012; Creech, Hallam, McQueen and Varvarigou, 2013), and writing in the field of music education, Jorgensen notes that 'socialisation is a lifelong process. It is not restricted to the young' (1997: 19). The importance of providing opportunities for and facilitating lifelong learning and engagement in the arts is often overlooked. Lifelong learning is an important factor in wellbeing, helping people to remain motivated and maintain an active mind. This article recognizes the impact of COVID-19 across all age groups and the value of social interaction to all members of the orchestra.

Scholarship in community music by authors including Veblen (2008) and Higgins (2012) is essential to understanding the roles of members, the development of activities and the implications for involvement for all members of the orchestra. Although the OTO do not provide formal lessons, its activities are related to or exist as an extension of music education (Veblen, 2008), complementing the work of teachers in the region. Less experienced members benefit from the mentorship of others and the aim is personal satisfaction and enjoyment rather than adhering to any curriculum or set of assessments.

Returning to the seminal work of Finnegan (2007) we consider the relationships between 'amateur' and 'professional' musicians, and different contexts for learning music with a particular focus on adapting to virtual contexts for music-making, learning and teaching. Joseph and Southcott state: 'Participation in community music making offers our participants a place and space for social belonging, sharing, enjoyment, personal development, and empowerment' (2014: 134). Higgins' (2012) focus on concepts of cultural democracy and community cultural development is reflected in the structures and activities of the orchestra. While the OTO has a committee and musical directors, the organisation of events and development of activities depends on the contributions and ideas of the membership, who are at various levels of musical development.

The benefits of participating in the orchestra are both musical and social and can help develop a sense of place and appreciation of heritage. Examining Irish contexts, geographer Aoife Kavanagh has described how musicians are 'nurtured, sustained and cared for in particular places, which lead to personal

fulfilment, well-being, learning and social bonding' (2019: 3). In an article about three singing groups in Australia, Joseph and Southcott (2014: 125) note the musical benefits of sharing, learning and performing that can contribute to health and wellbeing stating:

Social benefits included opportunities to build friendships, overcome isolation and gain a sense of validation. Many found that singing enhanced their health and happiness. Active music making in community choirs and music ensembles continues to be an effective way to support individuals, build community, and share culture and heritage.

Importantly, Huxhold, Miche and Schüz, note: 'those with closer social relations tend to be more optimistic and healthier' (2013: 366), while Joseph and Southcott note that conversely, 'a lack of social connectedness may have negative health outcomes' (2014: 126). Southcott and Joseph's (2017) study of philanthropy and community choirs in Australia is particularly influential, largely because of the similarities with the responses of the OTO in relation to social connection, social engagement and musicking.

The OTO demonstrates an emphasis on social enterprise in their activities and ethos. While the orchestra operates at a regional level in Ireland, international comparison may be drawn with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (WEDO) (Cheah, 2009) and, to a lesser extent, the development of El Sistema (Govias, 2011; Uy, 2012; Tunstall, 2013). Although the OTO is a cross-border orchestra, it does not set out explicitly to bring musicians from different cultural backgrounds together in the manner of the WEDO. Unlike El Sistema, the OTO does not set out to 'teach' but aspects of the approach, such as an emphasis on peer mentoring is evident. The OTO facilitates the coming together of musicians who have already reached a certain standard and who may be continuing in their musical education. It provides incentives for engagement such as opportunities to engage in workshops and performances. Perhaps of greater similarity is Glasgow Fiddle. Miller points to 'the structures and practices of community-based groups which set out to create environments for learning and making music', recognising that 'some existing models of music learning are inadequate in relation to the learning of traditional music' (2016: 1).

The Irish traditional music community is a network of people who are often connected through informal engagement in musicking, such as music sessions and festival attendance, or membership of an organisation. Comparison may be drawn with Kearney's observations of the Irish traditional music community in Montreal, Canada (2011) and, on a national level in Ireland, with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) (Henry, 1989; Fleming, 2004; Kearney, 2013). Although the OTO is not affiliated to CCÉ and is an independent charity, many of its members are also members or have been members of CCÉ and may have learned, are learning through, or are teaching classes organized by the organisation. CCÉ operates a branch system that is often based on small areas.<sup>5</sup> Other groups with similar aims and activities to the OTO in the region include Armagh Piper's Club (Vallely and Vallely, 2013), Music Generation,<sup>6</sup> Traditional Arts Partnership<sup>7</sup> and Scaleforce.<sup>8</sup> Many members of the OTO also participate with other groups including those listed, and are involved in the organisation of sessions, festivals and other events, creating an understanding of the Irish traditional music community as a network of individuals, organisations and events.

<sup>5</sup> There are 3 branches of CCÉ in Louth, 5 in Armagh and 7 in Monaghan. CCÉ has a regional centre in Dundalk called the Oriel Centre.

<sup>6</sup> Music Generation is a national music education partnership programme which aims to provide music education to children across Ireland. It operates partnerships in a number of centres across Ireland including three in the north-east region: Louth, Cavan/Monaghan and Meath. <https://www.musicgeneration.ie/> last accessed 25/08/2020

<sup>7</sup> Traditional Arts Partnership is a community-based collaboration to develop the skills of young musicians and celebrate the musical heritage and culture of south Armagh. <https://www.facebook.com/TraditionalArtsPartnership/> last accessed 25/08/2020

<sup>8</sup> Scaleforce is a voluntary initiative based in Dundalk that sought to provide opportunities for adult learners of Irish traditional music to share in informal music-making through slow sessions, sometimes with a guest musician who teaches a set of tunes. A list of repertoire and folder of music is shared amongst all members. <https://www.facebook.com/scaleforcemusic/> last accessed 28/08/2020

COVID-19 has challenged the structures of community in Irish traditional music and impacted on the way musicians learn, perform and experience music. Although this article is not focused on formal teaching practices, it is informed by developments in the scholarship of teaching and learning. There have been many developments in the area of virtual and online learning as documented by Waldron and Veblen (2008), Kenny (2013), Kearney (2016), Ward (2017) and Cawley (2018). For 71% involved in this study their first engagement with online learning was during COVID-19. As educators, we are involved in the scholarship of learning and teaching and have developed studies of pedagogical practice (Kearney, 2017, 2018) that inform this paper and can inform the future development of the OTO's pedagogical practice. In particular, our experience relating to the use and creation of audio-visual resources, sometimes by the participants themselves, for aiding learning and independent rehearsal at home has informed the development of resources made available to members. The activities of the OTO remain local and face-to-face, with technology utilized to reinforce the learning experience, provide additional resources for weaker learners, and, document activities.

#### 4. The Oriel Traditional Orchestra

Established in 2017, the OTO is a voluntary, cross-border,<sup>9</sup> intergenerational community orchestra whose members come primarily from Louth, Monaghan and Armagh.<sup>10</sup> The OTO concentrates on performing Irish traditional music repertoire from the Oriel region arranged especially for the orchestra by its members. Prior to COVID-19, the group met approximately twice a month to rehearse. Rehearsals took place in Dundalk Institute of Technology (Co. Louth), Carrickmacross Workhouse (Co. Monaghan) and Tí Chulainn Mullaghbawn (Co. Armagh). Some additional sectional rehearsals took place for smaller groups of musicians. All rehearsals are facilitated by volunteer tutors.

The OTO has a number of community enhancement and social integration aims including:

- Bringing together musicians of all ages from rural and urban backgrounds on both sides of the border;
- Making a diverse range of instruments accessible to musicians and communities, including larger orchestral instruments;
- Developing pride of place through the performance of local cultural heritage and encouraging creativity through the performance of members' compositions and arrangements;
- Mentoring of young musicians and creating leadership roles in an intergenerational context;
- Encouraging active participation in the arts through affordable membership, free workshops, and performances in community settings.

(OTO Constitution, 2017)<sup>11</sup>

At the time of the first survey, the orchestra records indicated a membership of 79 members, 75% of whom are female and 42% under the age of 18. This included family groups in the orchestra involving parents and children, siblings, and extended family members (cousins). There were 11 family memberships and 29 double memberships, indicating a high level of familial involvement. The membership is drawn from a geographical area focused on counties Louth, Monaghan and Armagh with some joining from other neighbouring counties. Members were required to audition but the majority of those who auditioned were invited to join the orchestra. The purpose of the audition is to ensure that all members have the capabilities to participate meaningfully in rehearsals and to familiarize the directors with the capabilities of the members.

#### 5. Geographical Context

Although within commuting distance of the major cities of Dublin and Belfast, the orchestra operates in a primarily rural region that has been adversely affected by the Northern Ireland Troubles and

<sup>9</sup> Counties Louth and Monaghan are in the Republic of Ireland; County Armagh is in Northern Ireland.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.orieltrad.org> last accessed 28/08/2020

<sup>11</sup> <https://orieltrad.org/about-us/> last accessed 28/08/2020

poor economic development. With members living primarily in counties Louth, Monaghan and Armagh, the orchestra draws on the cultural regions of Oriel (Ó Fiach, 1959; Ní Uallacháin, 2003; O'Connor, 2008, 2018; Moley, 2014; Crawford, 2019) and Sliabh Beagh (McElwain, 2015), which are not readily evident or defined in contemporary discourse or governance but reflect the imagination of other regional identities in the geography of Irish traditional music (Kearney, 2009). The orchestra does not provide tuition or formal learning pathways but learners in the region are supported by private teachers and other organisations, most notably CCÉ. Many of the orchestra's members are active in local branches and have both learned and taught with these branches.

Although the smallest county by area in Ireland (827km<sup>2</sup>), County Louth is one of the most densely populated (pop. 128,884 (2016)) with the two largest towns in the country, namely Dundalk and Drogheda. The county is strategically located on the Dublin - Belfast economic corridor and has strong economic, cultural and transport links to Northern Ireland, and as well as large urban centres, has significant rural areas. The Oriel region extends into the north of the county, which has strong historical connections with South Ulster, but the hosting of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2018 and 2019 in Drogheda, in the south of the county, has impacted positively on the participation and awareness of Irish traditional music. The OTO has received support from researchers based in Dundalk Institute of Technology and, prior to COVID-19, regularly rehearsed in the premises where facilities include those designed for music rehearsal and performance. The orchestra has also benefitted from the support of Louth County Council and the Louth Public Participation Network. Although there is no explicit reference to arts and culture, the *Louth County Development Plan 2015-2021* recognizes the importance of looking beyond the boundaries of the county in terms of tourism and heritage, seeking to develop identities for the Boyne Valley and Cooley/Mourne/Gullion Region.

Monaghan is a relatively small county (approx. 1,295km<sup>2</sup>; pop. 61,386) on the Donegal/Derry – Dublin corridor. Although Monaghan is located within the Northern and Western Regional Assembly Area, the National Planning Framework also recognizes that it is also part of a North East functional area where a key driver is the Dublin – Belfast cross border economic corridor (*Monaghan County Development Plan 2019 – 2025*). Primarily rural with a drumlin landscape interspersed with wetlands and woodlands, it has rich cultural heritage, including musical traditions that have been foregrounded in recent years despite previous neglect (McElwain, 2014, 2015). The OTO draws on the music of Brian O'Kane from Ballybay, who was very active in traditional music in Monaghan and Louth in the 1960s and 1970s and whose family are amongst the members of the orchestra. The arts development plan *Renewing the Case for the Arts* provides a five-year framework for strategic actions to be implemented by Monaghan Arts Office on behalf of Monaghan County Council. Monaghan County Council has been supportive of the OTO and, during lockdown, included a recording of the orchestra in their series of virtual performances.

Located in Northern Ireland, County Armagh (Area: 1,326 km<sup>2</sup>; Population: 174,792 (2011)) has a rich history but was also deeply impacted by the Troubles.<sup>12</sup> The membership of the OTO and their activities in the county are located primarily in the rural south of the county in the area around Sliabh Gullion, traditionally associated with the Oriel region and the very strong tradition of Irish-language poetry. Other groups active in the county include the Armagh Pipers' Club (Vallely and Vallely, 2013), who organize the William Kennedy Piping Festival, and the Armagh Rhymers/Mummers, as well as the Traditional Arts Partnership, who are based in Mullaghbawn where the OTO rehearse.

The operation of the OTO across a primarily rural region that spans a political boundary creates a number of challenges. Challenges highlighted by respondents included access to broadband and the ability to congregate, although two of the rehearsal venues usually used are in two of the main urban centres in the region. The latter was heightened during COVID-19 due to restrictions on movement. The

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<sup>12</sup> "The Troubles" refers to the period of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland from the 1960s to the 1990s involving pro-Union Loyalists, separatist Republicans, and the British armed forces.



OTO draws upon the cultural heritage of the Oriel region but is not limited to historical sources and includes newly created material and reaches beyond the normal limits of the region. The activities of the OTO reflect the commitment to traditional music in the arts plans and related strategies of each of the counties (Monaghan County Council, 2016; Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, 2018, Creative Ireland Louth, 2018).

## 6. OTO Activities During COVID-19 Outbreak

Prior to the imposition of a lockdown in the Republic of Ireland on 27 March 2020, the OTO had been making plans for a number of performances and other activities. The orchestra had organized workshops as part of *Seachtain na Gaeilge*<sup>13</sup> in Castleblayney, Co. Monaghan on 21 March 2020 and were scheduled to perform in Keady, Co. Armagh on 18 April 2020. Once it became clear that there would not be a quick return to normal, the OTO committee set about making plans for online activities that would engage the members.

Prompted by communication from members and informed by the activities of other groups, which were being shared on social media, a series of three videos were planned, whereby three of the musical directors each made a recording that was shared with members on 25 April 2020. The committee chose three pieces of varying stages of difficulty. Members were invited to record themselves playing along to one or more of the pieces, with the option of submitting audio or audio-visual recordings. Instructions on how to make the recordings were provided and members were requested to submit their audio or video files one month later. These were then edited together by members of the orchestra who had developed skills in this area.

The first piece to be completed was 'The Shores of Lough Major', a march by Brian O'Kane from Co. Monaghan. This piece was chosen as it had been rehearsed to a high standard prior to lockdown and had been performed in a number of concerts. The committee felt that the piece was accessible to all members and would prompt a high level of engagement. It was shared on the orchestra's Facebook page on 5 June 2020.<sup>14</sup> Comments included positive feedback from many members who acknowledged the work that went into putting the video together. Without being prompted by the OTO narrative, one non-member commented that this piece had been performed by the Siamsa Céilí Band from Dundalk, winners of the All-Ireland Senior Céilí Band Championship 1967-1969, of which Brian O'Kane had been a member, emphasising the connection between the repertoire and the region's musical heritage. Subsequently the video was shared by Monaghan County Council as part of their 'Le Chéile Muineachán', a series of virtual performances featuring music from artists in the county presented in the Irish language by Conchubhair Mac Lochlainn.

The second piece was a set of two jigs which had been introduced to the repertoire more recently. 'Eddie Curran's Jig' and 'The Setting Sun' were drawn from the research of Dr Seán McElwain on the Sliabh Beagh region of Co. Monaghan (2014, 2015). The arrangement of these jigs was more challenging than the arrangement of the previous piece. The completed recording was shared to mark European and World Music Day on 21 June 2020.<sup>15</sup>

The third recording was taken from a longer suite of music composed for the orchestra by one of the directors, Daithí Kearney, entitled 'The Oriel March'. The chosen movements were in two different time signatures and the video featured photographs submitted by members of the orchestra to reflect the history and landscape of the Oriel region. The inclusion of the images reinforced the sense of geographical location and identity for the orchestra and was an opportunity for members to contribute leading to greater shared ownership of the project.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is an Irish-language festival held annually. Events are organized nationally and internationally. <https://snag.ie/en/> last accessed 27/08/2020.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO13PyU3C9I> last accessed 31/08/2020.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNSySOQ3Dsk> last accessed 31/08/2020.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIFS1rogk40> last accessed 31/08/2020.

The committee arranged for the third video to be shared first with members of the orchestra in a virtual social gathering facilitated on Google Meet on 4 July 2020. This created an opportunity for the members to come together and hear about some plans for the following months. There was a short presentation detailing the process of creating videos and informing the members about the new YouTube channel. In addition to the new video, the previous two videos were also replayed for the benefit of members who may not have had access to social media and also to create a collective experience. Members were invited to give feedback and give comments on the chat.

In total, 70% of members participated in the video projects with some providing additional videos and/or audio. This is comparable with face-to-face rehearsal attendance and indicates that it was possible to engage members in activities even when they were not meeting. Some participated in more than one video with 43 participating in two of the videos and 33 contributing to the first video. There was a spread of ages and sexes with some family units contributing collectively. While the process of creation does not recreate the experience of playing in an ensemble, the product (i.e. the videos) did lead to a shared experience, sense of achievement and reinforced a sense of community.

While the COVID-19 restrictions impacted on the activities of the orchestra, the committee continued to meet virtually, plan, engage in writing funding applications and devise new projects to ensure the sustainability and future development of the orchestra. On 17 July 2020, a questionnaire survey was circulated to members in relation to their experiences of music-making and their participation in the OTO during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further activities were planned for the summer period, including the sharing and learning of three new pieces of music by members of the orchestra. These activities, which were not planned prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and, the development of which was informed by the conditions imposed by the lockdown, are beyond the scope of this paper.

### 6.1 Survey 1

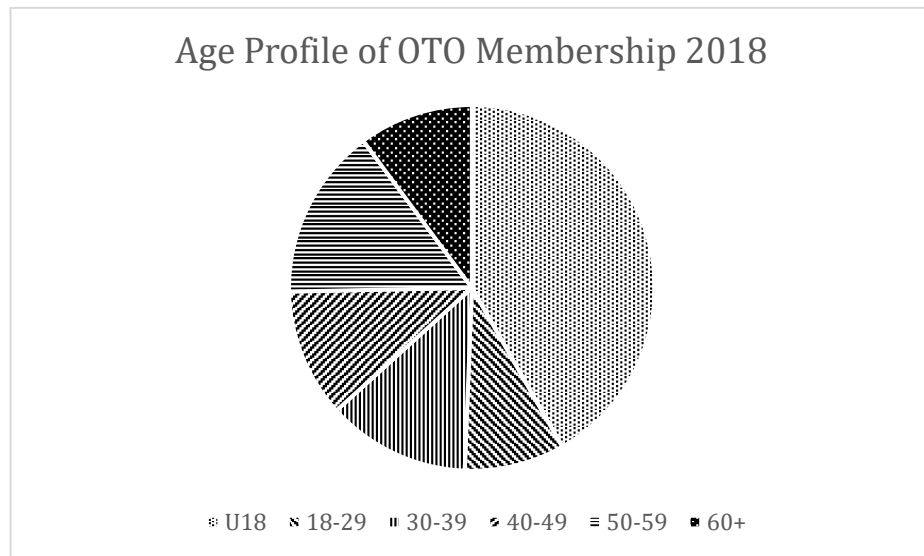
The following section focuses on answers to a survey conducted in November 2018, carried out with the dual aim of informing research on the development of a community ensemble and influencing the development of the orchestra itself as a form of Applied Ethnomusicology. The survey had a 25% response rate, primarily from female members in the 40-59 age range. There were three responses from members under the age of 18. The key areas for consideration were membership of the orchestra, rehearsals, repertoire and personal development of members, as well as ideas and plans for the future development of the orchestra. As reflective practitioners and researchers we have been involved in various groups throughout our life and it is important to monitor the impact of our biases, beliefs and personal experience on our interpretations of this data.

Members expressed a variety of reasons for joining the orchestra. Some had a desire to be part of an ensemble or community and to play regularly with other musicians in a structured setting, different to playing in sessions,<sup>17</sup> while others wished to improve their existing skills as musicians in non-competitive settings. For some of the more mature members of the group, it gave them the opportunity to return to an instrument that they had learned in their youth which echoes sentiments expressed in other studies (Southcott & Joseph, 2013; Li & Southcott, 2012). Some of the respondents recognized the opportunity to focus on local music, in line with the aims of the orchestra.

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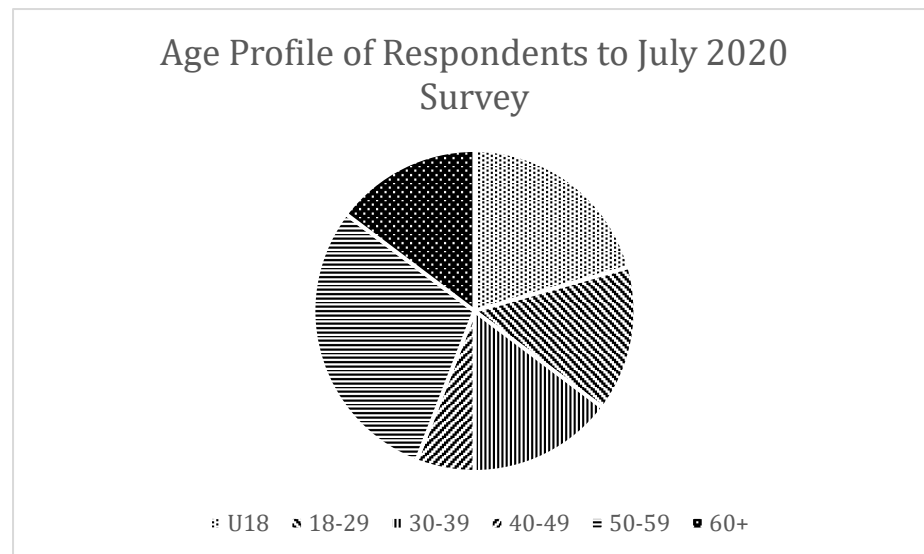
<sup>17</sup> In Irish traditional music, a session refers to a participative gathering of musicians, often in a public house. There is shared repertoire but the choice of music is spontaneous and most musicians play the melody.



**Figure 1.** Age profile of OTO membership, 2018.

## 6.2 Survey 2

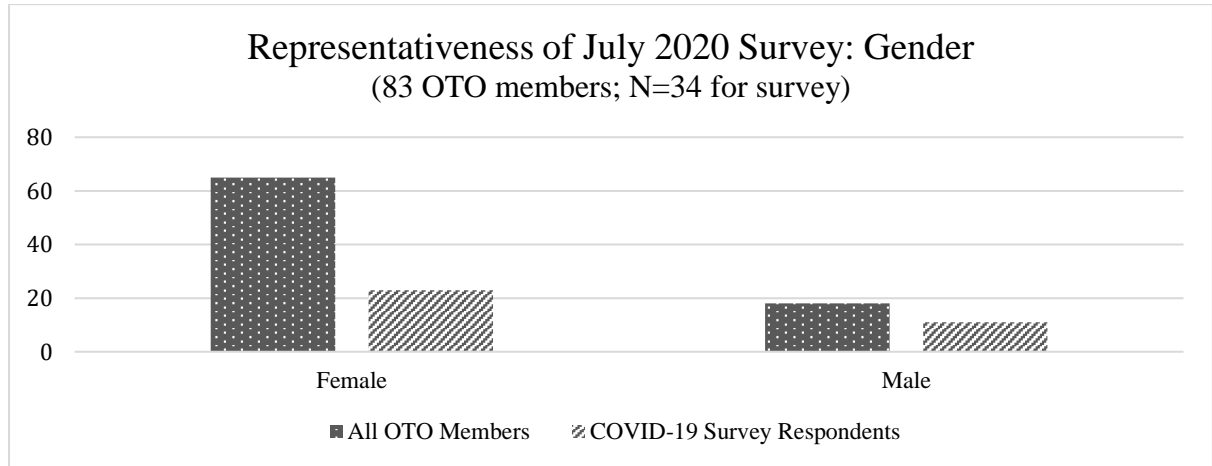
The second survey was undertaken in July 2020 to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the activities of the orchestra, to ascertain how planned activities had been received and to generate ideas for further development and projects that would support members and help realize the aims of the orchestra. The survey had a 41% response rate, which was representative of the age and gender breakdown of the orchestra. 20% are responses from members under the age of 18. The survey was completed at a time when COVID-19 restrictions were being eased but the orchestra remained unable to meet physically.

**Figure 2.** Age Profile of Respondents to July 2020 Survey.

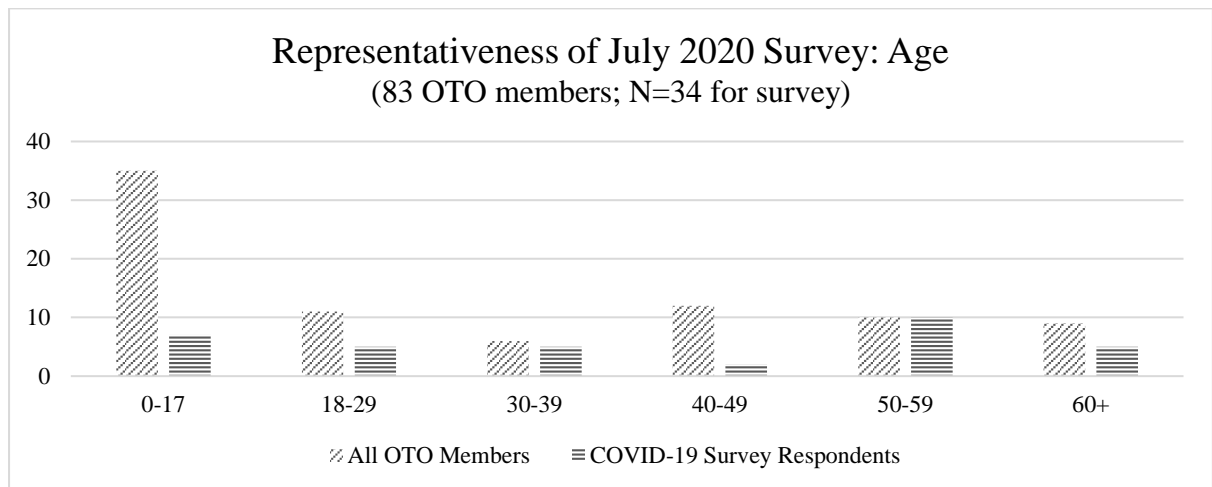
Some of the themes that emerged in the first survey were again evident in the second survey, in particular the importance of the social aspects of participating in the OTO. In addition to this, the survey elicited responses relating to the use of technology and online participation. 91% of the respondents had participated in the online projects developed by the OTO during COVID-19. Reasons for not participating in the project related to poor internet connection, family commitments and lack of practise on the part of

the individual. Responses indicate that the majority of members of the OTO engaged in less music-making during COVID-19. Members engaged to varying degrees with virtual musicking, which was not considered a sufficient replacement for musicking in social contexts or with social interaction.

**Figure 3.** Representativeness of July 2020 Survey by Gender Relative to OTO Membership.



**Figure 4.** Representativeness of July 2020 Survey by Age Relative to OTO Membership.



Both surveys indicated the many positive aspects for members who acknowledge intergenerational interaction, an interest in playing music of the region and the contribution of the orchestra to their own personal development and social network.

Five themes in the analysis of the survey responses relate to the social importance of musicking, inclusivity and musical development, the use and impact of technology, emotion and motivation, and teaching and learning resources.

**7. The Orchestra as Social Network**

The impact of socialized musicking on the wellbeing of participants is a key strand in this paper. In the first survey, members commented favourably on being part of the ensemble, with many members recognising the social aspect of being part of a group. Friendship and meeting new people were important to many of the members. In their study of a university choir, Jacob, Guptill and Sumsion noted that the

participants looked forward ‘to seeing their friends at choir practice each week and ... enjoy the social aspect of the choir’ (2009: 189). Participation in music activities create opportunities for social affirmation and collaborations that provide members with a sense of fulfilment and contributes to an overall sense of social cohesion (Joseph and Southcott, 2014).

The intergenerational aspect was noted by one respondent in the first survey as their favourite aspect as their membership of the orchestra allowed them to play with other members of their family and it contrasted with the other opportunities for music-making that existed.<sup>18</sup> One respondent noted: ‘Having my daughter join too has given us an active shared interest that is serving to strengthen our relationship too.’ The potential for community music to enhance intergenerational relationships has also been observed by Higgins (2012), and Southcott and Joseph (2014; 2017).

In the second survey, social opportunities - experienced through rehearsals, sessions and performances - were highlighted across many of the questions and underlined the importance of the orchestra as a social network with positive implications for the wellbeing of members. 74% of the responses have made references to communal music playing with only one respondent indicating that COVID-19 did not impact on their music-making. The importance of social interaction was highlighted with many indicating that they missed ‘seeing everyone’ and participating in sessions, rehearsals, and performances.

The social aspect of the OTO was very prominent in the answers regarding members’ favourite aspect of being involved. Notably, beyond learning and rehearsing, many respondents highlighted their joy and enthusiasm for performances. Thirteen explicitly refer to performance and the end product but others indicated playing music collectively as being important to them. Twelve respondents noted how their participation in the OTO helped improve their musicianship and musical knowledge with some making reference to the opportunity and challenge of performing arrangements and harmonies, which distinguishes playing with the OTO from other communal music-making contexts for Irish traditional music such as sessions. Three respondents also noted the importance of inter-generational music-making, while one also made reference to the cross-border nature of the orchestra. Thus, the orchestra creates opportunities for the development of a social network beyond the limitations usually experienced, such as those created by political boundaries or age.

Despite not being able to physically meet during COVID-19, the video projects were developed as an attempt to maintain a sense of connection and continue musical development. However, in most instances, the videos were created individually, although some family units did create videos together. Seventeen respondents referred to seeing the final video as the most enjoyable aspect of engaging in the virtual orchestra, noting the sense of achievement but also highlighting how this reflected and reinforced a sense of community.

Despite enhancing a sense of belonging to a community, engaging in virtual projects did not achieve social engagement. While the projects were created in isolation, the virtual gathering to view the video was a social occasion that involved chat, both spoken and typed. Emphasising the important social role of the orchestra, one respondent stated: ‘Great to see all the faces again, the social aspect of the OTO is very powerful, and important’. The survey responses indicate that while the process of creating videos was challenging for some, and the approach undertaken did not fully address the social isolation experienced, the product was rewarding.

Many of the difficulties faced in learning music are addressed during rehearsals when formal and informal scenarios support members overcome a range of challenges. Members often seek out other members to discuss aspects of a piece of music, engage in discussion about the sound or set up of their

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<sup>18</sup> For example, for public house sessions, musicians under the age of 18 were required to leave at 9pm. Another ensemble, organized by Music Generation Louth and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann was limited to members under the age of 18.

instrument, techniques used in performance, or approaches to practising. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, challenges came from a new context for playing: playing to a click track, recording, or not playing within an individual section with other musicians on the same instrument. One of the most significant difficulties experienced by members was ‘playing in time’, something that was emphasized by playing individually and in isolation. The deviation from the beat or rhythm was evident when attempting to edit the recordings to achieve synchronicity across all of the recordings. Related to this was the reference to ‘listening back’ made by three respondents. This may be related to additional responses that indicated that some participants found it disappointing to listen back to their own performance, perhaps best illustrated by one participant who stated: ‘Playing with other people in the flesh is more forgiving, more human; playing with a recording seems more unforgiving’. Others similarly commented on the absence of other musicians, or noted it was easier with others around, referring to ‘sharing the experience and learning from each other’. This again emphasized the social aspect and importance of the orchestra as experienced before COVID-19.

Across several questions on the survey, respondents referred to social aspects of the orchestra and their desire to meet and play music together. These aspects of the orchestra help strengthen the network and provide opportunities that might not otherwise exist. Nevertheless, online and virtual activities were viewed as a stop-gap response to the situation rather than a desired alternative to social gatherings.

### **8. Inclusivity and Musical Development**

The orchestra aims to be inclusive and the members have a wide range of abilities, experience and skills. As the orchestra has developed, some have been encouraged to take on leadership roles in different capacities, be they musical or pastoral. The importance of fostering inclusivity and strategies for inclusion are developed by Turino who notes:

- ‘The inclusion of people with a wide range of abilities within the same performance is important for inspiring participation’ (2008: 31)
- The presence of other people with similar abilities as oneself makes joining in comfortable’ (2008: 31)
- ‘When rank beginners, people with some limited skill, intermediates, and experts all perform together, however, people at each level can realistically aspire to and practically follow the example of people at the next level above them’ (2008: 31)

The OTO includes members with a wide range of experience and abilities but all have undergone an audition or the musical directors had knowledge of their musical abilities prior to joining. The varying levels in the orchestra creates opportunities for both shared experiences amongst members at a similar level but also mentoring provided by more experienced or advanced members. Some members are active music teachers while each instrument section has leaders appointed by the musical directors to support all of the musicians in that section. Arrangements are made by the musical directors, cognizant of the abilities of each section in the orchestra.

The orchestra has welcomed new members in each of its three years. Similar participation rates amongst members who joined at different stages suggests it is easy for new members to develop confidence as a member and to take part in activities if they are motivated. Rehearsal attendances, musicianship and ease with technology are probably more crucial than membership longevity.

A number of challenges were indicated by the members in both surveys. In the first survey, these included time commitment, learning the repertoire, and performing the music to the required standard. In the second survey, the challenges extended to relate to the use of technology, playing individually to make a recording, and changes in personal circumstances due to COVID-19 that may result in greater or lesser time available for participation in orchestra activities.

Another challenge highlighted in the responses to the first survey, which may be faced by those at either end of the experience spectrum, relates to the pace of progress – advanced members may find progress slow at times while less experienced members can find it difficult to keep up. For those used to learning by ear, following sheet music is a challenge, while others find it difficult to stay focused on parts, which may relate to confidence. One survey respondent commented: ‘I find it a very good learning environment that isn't too intense but that gives everyone an equal chance!’

Musical development was highlighted as an important aspect of participating in the orchestra in the first survey. For some members their favourite aspect was being part of an ensemble noting the orchestral sound with one member commenting ‘I enjoy the opportunity to play in a large group and also trying the complex arrangements - harmonies and counter melodies.’ Unlike sessions and many other performance contexts for Irish traditional music, the OTO creates orchestral-style arrangements of the music with parts for each instrument. In the second survey, respondents noted how this created an enjoyable challenge that, in the words of one respondent, ‘is better than anything I can make on my own’. For many respondents to the second survey, the restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak meant they missed the opportunity to learn new material and rehearse it to a standard ready for performance. Performing and playing new pieces was particularly important to members under the age of eighteen. Playing with a wide age range was particularly important to those aged over forty while playing arrangements / harmonies / counter melodies was mentioned more by those over the age of fifty.

While the orchestra committee sought to ensure that the projects and activities engaged in during COVID-19 were inclusive and developed detailed instructions for the projects, it is clear that further steps could be taken. Some respondents to the second survey indicated a desire for more resources such as additional videos for individual parts. Some also indicated difficulties with internet connections but the majority were able to engage. At the time of writing, the committee were engaged in discussions about how to continue to sustain the activities of the orchestra in line with public health guidelines on both sides of the border and ensuring the safety of all members.

While the virtual performances of the OTO were created in isolation, members still felt that it reinforced their sense of belonging. This was further enhanced by the virtual gathering to view the final video as a collective audience on 4 July 2020. A sense of belonging is a recurring element of the answers referring to the most enjoyable aspect of engaging in the virtual orchestra with one respondent writing that their favourite aspect was: ‘to know we are part of an orchestra and our single audio will be mixed and become part of the orchestra sound again’.

## **9. Use and Impact of Technology**

The orchestra committee explored the use of technology to ensure continued engagement in activities, which had an impact on the wellbeing of members. 71% of respondents indicated that they had engaged in online music-making and/or learning prior to COVID-19 and the answers were common across all age ranges. The orchestra had already developed some online resources including a members-only section on the website that made videos, sheet music and recordings available. The committee and orchestra members were also aware of efforts being made by other groups and organisations to utilize technology as a means to maintain communication and engagement in musical development during the restrictions. 50% of respondents engaged in virtual music-making with other groups.

While the use of technology ensured that there was a continued connection between members, there were also some challenges highlighted. Three respondents noted the benefits of using technology for keeping in contact, collaborating and sharing recordings. Referring to their experience with other groups, one respondent noted: ‘Playing on Zoom or JitSi just wasn't the same’ while another indicated that the quality of the online experience was poor and so they disengaged. Another noted ‘Meeting on-line and not being able to play!!’ as a challenge, highlighting the frustration felt by many members.

To support members, the committee provided members with detailed instructions and technical support as to how to create and upload videos. Families were encouraged to record together as a unit. To make the recordings, members needed earphones or a headset and two devices, one for recording and one to listen to the pre-recorded video. Members' videos were to be recorded in landscape with pointers given on tuning, lighting and positioning.

Three respondents indicated technical difficulties with recording their contributions. Of greater significance, the quality of broadband, particularly in rural areas, was highlighted: 29% indicated difficulties with internet or broadband. It is possible that, as with the video project itself, members with poor internet or less confidence with technology did not engage to the same extent with this survey. Only two respondents noted that they had no challenges.

One positive aspect of the COVID-19 outbreak was the proliferation of performances by artists online and efforts by artists and organisations to provide and facilitate online learning. 68% of respondents indicated that they had engaged with arts online. 47% of the respondents made reference to engaging with online performances while 32% indicated that they had participated in online learning. In relation to what was engaged with, local, national and international artists were referenced, with some indicating greater access to traditional artists. One respondent noted: 'It is great to see the efforts that some musicians have made to keep their art in the public eye despite the lockdown'. Other artforms were also mentioned.

Some noted the potential of technology to provide social engagement but the challenges presented by technology and broadband speeds was also highlighted, illustrated by a respondent who stated: 'I don't see any enjoyment in playing in a session "solo", especially as everybody's broadband is out of sync'. While some did not have more time as a result of COVID-19 due to work commitments, it was also acknowledged that this period created an opportunity for some to immerse themselves in and listen to more traditional music than they would usually have had time for or, in another instance, the greater access and availability of online performances and learning opportunities alleviated boredom.

It is clear that, while the orchestra made efforts to engage in both music and social activities online during the COVID-19 outbreak, technology does not replace social interaction and only goes some way towards maintaining a connection. While technology can help sustain a sense of community, it can also place pressures on people that can be detrimental to wellbeing if not carefully planned and supported.

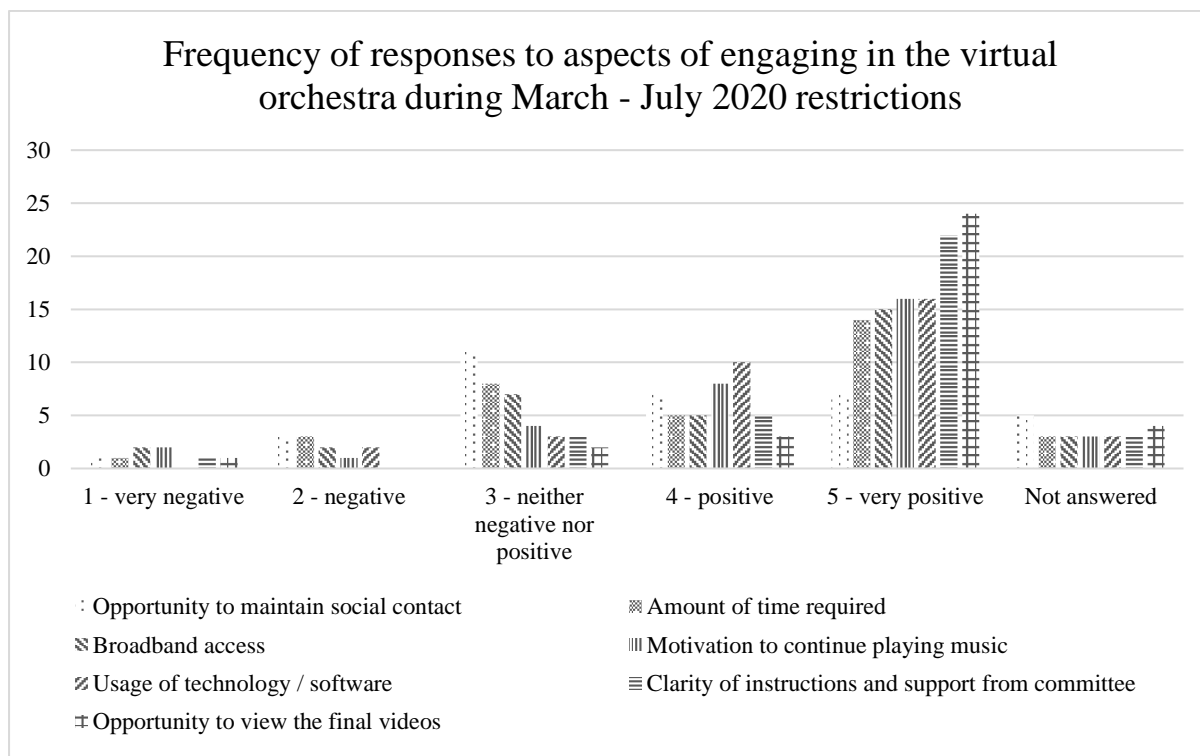
The quality of seven aspects of the experience of engaging virtually with OTO were rated by respondents on a five-point Likert Scale. (see figure 5).

Overall, respondents indicated that the process of engaging virtually and collaboratively with OTO in the production of videos was a positive experience but many detailed challenges and negative experiences due to a variety of factors. Respondents of all ages were, in general, at ease with the instructions and technologies (recording and uploading video clips on smartphones). The activities were an important motivating factor for members to engage in music-making but were often done in isolation. While respondents were delighted to view the final videos, they were less enthusiastic about the project as a means to maintain social contact.

## **10. Motivation and Emotion**

It is clear that the COVID-19 outbreak had an impact on members' emotions and their motivations for engaging in music. Southcott and Joseph refer to a number of studies (Skingley & Bungay, 2010; Escuder-Mollon, 2012; Creech, et al., 2013), which demonstrate that 'singing in a group can provide opportunities for people to combat negative feelings such as depression, loneliness and a sense of social isolation' (2014: 127). The video project developed by the orchestra also resulted in an emotional response, providing a motivation for engaging in music but also putting some members under pressure. Respondents noted nerves, embarrassment, frustration and a lack of confidence that emerged during the

**Figure 5.** Frequency of responses to aspects of engaging in the virtual orchestra during March - July 2020 restrictions



video project, with one noting a desire to ‘get it as right as possible’. Respondents also indicated a very positive response to the project including satisfaction at completing it and viewing the final videos. The online gathering to view the final video was also an occasion for members to express their happiness at being together and being proud of what they had created.

Seventeen respondents made explicit reference to the emotional detachment caused by the cessation of communal music-making, although it could be interpreted from a significant number of other responses. Seven explicitly mentioned a lack of motivation as a result of reduced opportunities for social musicking during COVID-19. While some indicated that they did practise at home, with two indicating that the additional time at home was beneficial to learning repertoire or being creative, others indicated that they were less likely to play music during COVID-19. Other recurring words included ‘missed’, ‘isolated’ and ‘lonely’. Drawing on the work of Chen and Feeley (2014), Joseph and Southcott state that ‘a lack of social connection may be understood by the individual as loneliness that is an unique and powerful negative predictor of well-being’ (2014: 126).

The particular importance of the OTO for some members was highlighted by a respondent who stated: ‘OTO was my main music outlet so COVID-19 has hugely affected my musical life’. The main aspects of the OTO were that communal gathering acted as a motivation to practise, learn new repertoire and to play with a preference expressed for playing in a group. An important aspect of the video projects was motivation, summed up by one respondent who stated: ‘Only for it, my instrument would still be in its case’. Several respondents referred to returning to practise in order to work towards a successful recording and remain competent with the repertoire of the orchestra. While the responses were generally positive, one respondent noted that they did not enjoy the experience and would rather face-to-face music-making.



A significant difference between the face-to-face rehearsals and the online activities is the opportunity to develop musicality in response to a conductor and other members of the ensemble. Online and virtual activities, whether synchronous or asynchronous, cannot replace the act of physically participating in an ensemble. Learning takes place when the musicians play together, affecting our awareness of synchronicity, intonation, tempo, dynamics and other aspects of music-making. Playing to a backing track creates an individual response that does not benefit from the energy that has already been created in an ensemble context.

The factor of time and its impact on participation and emotion differed greatly amongst members. Some became busier with work commitments and thus could not engage to a greater extent with music but many others had more time available to engage and viewed the project and access to virtual arts as a distraction from the pandemic. While music can have a positive impact on wellbeing (DeNora 2016), the survey highlights that, for the majority involved in the OTO, music without social interaction is less appealing and that social interaction brought about through participation in a music ensemble has a greater impact on wellbeing. Responses included: 'It has helped provide a focus and something to look forward to', and 'making us feel we still belong to OTO in these days of isolating life!'

### **11. Future Directions and Personal Development**

In general, there was positive feedback to the video collaboration project as respondents indicated that it motivated them to practise and it was 'terrific to have been able to maintain ties', 'fantastic' and 'a great challenge'. Respondents also provided some ideas for future development. These included a desire for opportunities to talk, chat or ask questions (synchronous) rather than just working alone with videos (asynchronous). Ideas presented include inviting members to perform during virtual gatherings and develop further resources.

While the OTO does not engage in formal teaching activities, many members are engaged in formal lessons or learning activities with other organisations or private teachers, or are themselves teachers in a private capacity. These formal learning contexts were significantly impacted by COVID-19. The cancellation of lessons, which may be one-to-one or group, is noted by six respondents and closely linked to comments regarding playing with others. In some instances, lessons were facilitated by online means. It is evident that the rehearsals facilitated by the OTO are an integral part of learning and practising for a significant segment of the membership. The cancellation of lessons or their migration to online platforms was a disruption in the lives of those involved and such disruption can have a negative impact on wellbeing.

The COVID-19 outbreak also impacted on the regularity and schedule of activities and rehearsals for the orchestra. While the committee sought to respond to the changing circumstances with the video projects, the lack of knowledge surrounding the potential duration of the restrictions and the need to develop resources impacted on their ability to meet the needs and desires of members. Requests referred to consistency in activities and further projects that are appropriately spaced out. Respondents indicated a desire for teaching and learning resources that are more focused to help individuals with different instrument lines and harmonies. In addition to the video resources, some indicated a need for greater support such as synchronous opportunities and direction including sectionals or small group sessions. It is clear that some members value the feedback received during rehearsals in relation to their learning and progress, which has been more limited in the online engagement but can be developed further. This may be related to confidence and motivation and can support the wellbeing of members. Despite positive responses to the project, it is clear that respondents would welcome more opportunities to engage in 'live' or synchronous sessions that facilitates more interaction with other members and could be supported by socially-distanced small group rehearsals in line with public health guidelines. As with other answers, this re-emphasizes the importance of social gatherings for members of the orchestra.

## 12. Conclusions

Engagement in virtual musicking can have a significant positive impact on wellbeing but is not without challenges. Being part of an orchestra at any level requires members to learn and rehearse in order to reach an acceptable standard for ensemble playing. Many of the benefits relate to confidence resulting from the achievement of performing as part of a group but are also related to the social network that develops amongst members. For some members of the OTO, their participation in rehearsal extended to include going for coffee or lunch with other members or arranging to meet for further music-making on other occasions. The COVID-19 outbreak impacted on the activities of the OTO but also created an opportunity to explore new ways of engaging virtually in musicking.

The challenges presented by the virtual activities undertaken by the OTO during the COVID-19 restrictions were identified as influencing motivation and continuing engagement in both the orchestra as a social group and in musicking more generally. Prior to COVID-19, members of the OTO had highlighted how their involvement with the orchestra led to greater confidence in their playing and that they had benefited from greater social interaction. Members with a higher rehearsal attendance rate were more likely to engage in the virtual activities. Virtual musicking was utilized by the OTO during COVID-19 to achieve a number of benefits but it did not enhance wellbeing amongst this community music ensemble to a level experienced in face-to-face contexts. Musically, it allowed members to engage with the repertoire of the orchestra. However, it did not replace the making of music with other people. The challenge for community music ensembles, in the context of COVID-19-related social restrictions, is to build upon the lessons learned from virtual musicking and to develop virtual activities that maintain and strengthen the social bonds between members. As Turino notes, 'to keep everybody engaged, participatory musical and dance roles must have an ever-expanding ceiling of challenges' (2008: 31). Keeping everybody engaged in a time of social restrictions is the ultimate ceiling of challenges for a community music ensemble.

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