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Can You Hear Us? Person-centred music-making through video calls with isolated vulnerable elderly people and their carers during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Article Info.	Abstract

As a result of the COVID-19 measures, many people experienced social isolation and a lack of meaningful contact, especially vulnerable elderly people. For a specific group of musicians specialized in person-centred artistically-led participatory practices in healthcare settings, this sparked the exploration of migrating their live practice online, by making use of video-calling technology. From a 'lifelong learning' perspective—which considers musicians as being capable of responding to societal change by creating new, meaningful artistic practices—such a sudden migration from offline to online, under the exceptional circumstances at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, created an instant challenge for the musicians to demonstrate their flexibility and adaptability. On the other hand, the limits caused by the conditions and immediacy of this response, combined with a feeling of diminished humanness in virtual interaction, seemed to jeopardize the person-centred values that the work of this group is built upon.

This article explores this issue by expanding on the musicians' flexibility towards person-centredness and their attempts to safeguard these values when they suddenly switch from a 'physical' to 'virtual' space. The musicians systematically produced reflective writings during the project period which were analysed thematically. The results show the various ways through which the musicians tried to compensate for the lack of physical co-presence by creating (new) virtual ways of making meaningful musical connections and invigorating a sense of 'liveness' through careful consideration of (1) the musical approach, (2) building an appropriate social (virtual) space, and (3) managing their self-development. The multiple professional and personal challenges that the musicians faced required them to act as exceptional lifelong learners and their response to these challenges suggests that their flexible attitude, which is an inherent part of their approach, was exactly what could enable them to perform the switch to virtual person-centred music-making successfully.

1

1.   Introduction

1.1   Context and Background

With the practice-based research project *Music Near You*[1], the research group Lifelong Learning in Music[2], in collaboration with the musicians' collective Foundation Mimic Music[3] and the day-care centre for vulnerable elderly people Goudvink (*Goldfinch*), aimed to develop new formats of person-centred music-making for vulnerable, independently-living elderly people and those that care for them. Person-centred music-making intends to tailor the music to participants through improvisation and (arranged) repertoire (Smilde, Page and Alheit, 2014) and has shown to potentially empower and strengthen relationships (Smilde et al., 2014; Smilde, Heineman, De Wit, Dons and Alheit, 2019).

The original plan of *Music Near You* consisted of two in-person workshop series in which musicians and groups of participants of Goudvink would meet in-person on a weekly basis. The first series was set to start in April 2020. The musicians were in the middle of preparing for the first sessions when, in mid-March, the first lockdown was installed in The Netherlands and, thus, the set workshop dates cancelled. The wish to musically interact, however, remained. When the Goudvink coordinator signalled, at the beginning of April, that the mental health of the centre's participants had deteriorated rapidly as a result of the lockdown, the urgency for meaningful contact grew and the idea to initiate musical interactions through virtual, video-calling means was explored.

1.2   Elderly People in Isolation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

On 11th March 2020, measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 were announced which drastically strained citizens' freedom of mobility. To protect the most vulnerable populations, elderly people were strongly advised to avoid contact with others. As a result, family and friends ceased visiting and elderly people could not leave their house unless absolutely necessary (see also Brooke and Jackson, 2020).

For a significant part of the elderly population, however, experiencing a lack of social contact was already a reality before the outbreak of the virus. A 2016 national study showed that almost two thirds (63%) of Dutch people older than 85 years old experience loneliness (GGD Nederland, 2016) Those having gone through life experiences such as losing a loved one or losing mobility and independence are at particularly high risk (ibid.). In addition, feeling lonely also occurs when the quality of social contact is not satisfactory (Gierveld-de Jong and van Tilburg, 2007).

A group especially prone to isolation and loneliness are people with dementia and the family members and volunteers that care for them. About 85% of people diagnosed with dementia live independently (not in a care facility), often with little help from others (The, 2017). With the 'Longer at Home'[4] policy programme, which aims to provide support that encourages people to age independently within their home surroundings (Rijksoverheid, 2018), this figure will likely increase. As the longest period of the condition is usually spent at home, it is, therefore, no surprise that people with dementia living alone or with their partner often report feeling 'forgotten' (The, 2017).

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[2] The research group examines the relationship between musicians and society and explores questions such as what engaging with new audiences means for the different roles, learning, and leadership of musicians. See www.lifelonglearninginmusic.org.
[3] Foundation Mimic Music (Dutch: *Stichting Mimic Muziek*) is a collective of professional musicians making live music in a person-centred way for vulnerable people in care contexts. See www.mimicmuziek.nl.
[4] In Dutch: *Langer Thuis*

Informal carers[5] such as family members and volunteers are key in the wellbeing of isolated vulnerable elderly people. Accelerated by the transition from a welfare state[6] to a participatory society[7] in The Netherlands, the mental burden that informal carers experience is often overlooked (Wettenbank, 2020). Partners experience an increasing emptiness as they mourn for slowly losing their loved one (The, 2017) and almost half of informal carers develop symptoms of depression within two years, of which 5% report suicidal thoughts (Joling, O'Dwyer, Hertogh and Van Hout, 2017).

The spiritual and social wellbeing of isolated elderly people and their partners or informal carers is, however, gaining increasing attention (Marmot and Wilkinson, 2005). Whereas the medical support system has often been criticized for focusing (too) heavily on the treatment of only the disease itself, the social context of the individual is recently being addressed more carefully (Broekema, Paans, Roodbol and Luttik, 2019) and the importance for vulnerable elderly to continue taking part in normal, everyday things is gaining wider recognition (The, 2017).

Thus, the need to create meaningful interactions with elderly people is evident—particularly for those already prone to loneliness before the COVID-19 pandemic. Musicians are, from a lifelong learning perspective, able to respond to such societal change by creating new, meaningful artistic practices (Smilde, 2018). 'Lifelong learning' is 'a dynamic concept of learning centrally concerned with different ways of responding to change' (Smilde, 2009: 49). Building on the success of earlier person-centred work with vulnerable elderly people (see, for example, Smilde et al., 2014; Smilde et al., 2019), it seemed therefore justified and worthwhile to explore how the existing Mimic collective of musicians could address the wellbeing of vulnerable elderly visitors of Goudvink, who were now in imposed isolation.

The exceptional circumstances of the pandemic brought to question how and to what extent the musicians—considering them indeed as lifelong learners—could explore an adequate response that satisfies both their 'audiences' and themselves. The prohibition of physical contact prompted the musicians[8] to develop a virtual interactive music practice. Unfamiliar with such virtual music-making, as well as with expectations concerning the further development of the crisis, the musicians were instantly challenged in their 'lifelong' flexibility and adaptability.

2.   Introduction to Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

2.1   The Field of Music, Health, and Wellbeing

The application of musical activities for the benefit of human health and wellbeing has been practised and researched increasingly over the past few decades. While music and other artistic practices have played a central role in the lives and development of humankind since prehistoric times (Mithen, 2005; Morley, 2013), scholarly and practitioner interest in music's origins and possible functions has been growing for around a century (Kursell, 2018; Edwards, 2007). There is a plethora of texts dedicated to theories about the origins of music (e.g., Wallin, Merker and Brown, 2000; Honing, 2018) and/or the various social, psychological, and emotional effects that playing or listening to music can have on people (e.g., Harvey, 2017; Hallam, Cross, and Thaut, 2009; MacDonald, Kreutz, and Mitchell, 2012; Juslin, 2010).

At the same time, the practitioner fields of applied music-making have also developed into more established sectors, such as the health-related practices of 'music therapy' and 'health musicking'[9] (see

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[5] In Dutch, their role is designated as *mantelzorger*: a member of a vulnerable person's network taking on formal care responsibilities.

[6] In Dutch: *verzorgingsstaat.*

[7] In Dutch: *participatiesamenleving.*

[8] (two of whom have also acted as contributing authors of this article)

[9] While the term 'music therapy' is given only to the medical practice led by trained music therapy professionals, 'health musicking' is the term given by Bonde (2011) to the broader field that encompasses all music intervention practices that have the health and

3

Person-centred music-making through video calls with isolated vulnerable elderly people and their carers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Trondalen and Bonde, 2012; Stige, 2012) on one hand, and broader social practices termed as 'community music' or 'music intervention' (see Higgins, 2012; Bartleet and Higgins, 2018) on the other. These include an array of organisations, programmes and projects that use music for improving individual wellbeing, as well as strengthening communities, improving social integration, and promoting cultural inclusion for different social groups and causes around the world (Edwards, 2007; Bartleet and Higgins, 2018). Musical activity has been shown to have a positive impact in, for example, physical and mental rehabilitation from illness or trauma (Aldridge, 2005); being an aid for people with permanent disabilities (Ockelford, 2012) or chronic illness (Pothoulaki, MacDonald and Flowers, 2012); improving the wellbeing and mental health of elderly people, with or without cognitive impairment, such as dementia (Ridder, 2005; Clift, Gilbert and Vella-Burrows, 2018); facilitating social bonding and empathy between people (Turino, 2008); and facilitating emotional empowerment for individuals and even whole communities (e.g., Barz, 2006, cited in Elliott and Silverman, 2012: 35).

2.2   Music Intervention Strategies for Elderly People: Self-Identity and the Person-Centred Approach

Seeming key to the beneficial results of music intervention activities, in general, are its potential connections to identity reformation and 'selfhood' (Elliott and Silverman, 2012). Through the emotions, memories, shifting of perspectives, self-expression, and so on, which (intentionally applied) music-making can induce, participants can get (back) in touch with themselves, and this self-empowerment appears to have a significant impact on improving individual and collective wellbeing (Elliott and Silverman, 2012; Ruud, 2017; Magee, 2017; Baker and MacDonald, 2017; Smilde, 2018). It is upon this identity-empowerment process that many music intervention practices base their programs.

Elliott and Silverman (2012) especially highlight the importance of 'the self' by bringing in Ulrich Neisser's (1988) framework as a way to 'provide pathways to an improved understanding of the self and music-self relationships'. Neisser suggests that, 'the individual self may be thought of as a combination of several simultaneous selves or dimensions: an ecological self (the self in its physical environment), an interpersonal-self, an extended self (defined by its personal memories), a conceptual-cultural self, a private self (I-awareness), and a narrative self (the self-portrait one creates about oneself over time)' (Neisser, 1988, cited in Elliott and Silverman, 2012: 31). This is because, as the authors argue:

> Implicit in all questions related to music, health, wellness, therapy, and education is a more fundamental question: what or where is 'the self' that we are concerned to heal, revitalize, rehabilitate, or educate? Who am I, me, you, and us? The concepts embedded in social practice theory provide pathways to an improved understanding of the self and music–self relationships. (Elliott and Silverman, 2012: 31)

When utilizing music intervention strategies for elderly people, in particular, identity and selfhood often act as a central point for the creative processes involved. For example, research has shown that illustrating one's autobiography through music not only strengthened the elderly participants' sense of self-identity, but also 'revealed hidden facets, and changed attitudes towards the elderly' (see Dassa, 2018). Studies like these show the ability of identity-oriented music-making to empower participants' sense of self, as well as how the practice of discovering the identities of the individuals can have an additional positive effect on how others perceive them.

Music interventions for people with dementia have been a particularly booming area of research in recent years. Music-dementia programmes have been shown to significantly improve individuals' quality of life by reducing anxiety, agitation, and behavioural problems (Tsoi, Chan, Ng, Lee, Kwok and Wong, 2018) connected to the disease, and positively increasing their social engagement, lifting moods and bringing joy (Ihara, Tompkins, Inoue and Sonneman, 2018). Some studies have shown that, for people with

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wellbeing of participants as a goal (Trondalen and Bonde, 2012; Stige, 2012). The current study could be seen as a health-musicking practice with an artistic basis, rather than a therapeutic one.

dementia specifically, passive music reception appears to be somewhat more effective than participatory music action (such as playing instruments themselves) in yielding positive results (Tsoi et al., 2018). However, while some such broad musical strategies have proven to be more effective than others for this particular group of people, no standardized interventions have been successfully implemented, due to the need for participants' individual requirements and subtle mood changes to be read and tailored to (Ihara et al., 2018: 32).

This is where a 'person-centred approach' to music-making comes in. Coined within contexts of caring for people with dementia, person-centredness represents a paradigm shift in the perception of ill people from a bleak picture of suffering towards a focus on maintaining 'personhood' by embracing the uniqueness of persons in fostering relationships (Kitwood, 1997). This ethos underpinned the development of *Music for Life*—a creative workshop practice for people with dementia and their carers which was studied by our research group (Smilde et al., 2014). Person-centred musical interaction is able to call upon the self, even in advanced stages of dementia (Smilde et al., 2014; Sacks, 2008).

Person-centred music-making, 'entails a variety of approaches that seek to 'tune in' to the group, or person, and where musicians draw upon a body of shared repertoire and approaches' (Smilde et al., 2014: 27). A musical person-centred approach is able to call upon personhood by fostering meaningful musical interactions between people, even in cases of severe vulnerability. 'Music is generated *by* the musicians *from* the residents' (ibid.: 247); musicians and participants thus co-create music, meaning that a jointly created outcome is sought after that is, eventually, meaningful to all involved, including the musicians (Dons, 2019; Zeilig, West and Van der Byl-Williams, 2018). Person-centred music-making involves improvisations but equally repertoire and arrangements, as well as idiomatic improvisations which 'relate to a certain style and/or idiom, e.g. of a pop band' (Smilde et al., 2019: 4). The relationship between care professionals and the people they care for can deepen through participating in person-centred music-making, potentially resulting in more compassionate caregiving (De Wit, 2020; Smilde et al., 2019).

A comparison of studies into existing person-centred music practices reveals the high levels of social skills, flexibility, artistic mastery and reflective practice required from the musicians (Smilde et al., 2014; Smilde et al., 2019; Dons, 2019; Wakeling, 2014; Smilde, 2018). The idiosyncrasies of each practice endorse the importance of what Renshaw (2010) has termed 'fitness for purpose' and 'relevance to context' when attempting to judge the quality of this kind of work.

Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that person-centredness requires great sensitivity, tacit knowing and skills to 'read' the situation, which has been known amongst practitioners as the '360 degrees radar' (Smilde et al., 2019; Smilde, 2018). Such reading strongly relies on embodiment and being physically co-present with participants. It is unknown if and how such a reading can take place in an online, virtual environment, being in separate physical spaces.

2.3   Music, Technology, and 'Liveness'

Where music and technological developments have fueled a fair amount of research in recent years, the question of how music is perceived differently between live performance and recordings has been studied quite extensively. Existing studies on performing music to an audience in real-time *via* communication technology are, however, more difficult to find.

Theories of 'liveness', initially conceptualized by Philip Auslander, have been developed in response to how the concepts of 'live' and 'not live' tend to be experienced within the new digital age: an age in which the former distinction of 'live music' meaning, simply, 'not recorded' is becoming increasingly blurred (Auslander, 2008). Since 'liveness' is no longer as straightforward as it once was,

5

Person-centred music-making through video calls with isolated vulnerable elderly people and their carers during the COVID-19 pandemic

important elements of the live experience have been theorized which may give the conceptual *feeling* of liveness or 'being there' (Radbourne, Johanson and Glow, 2014).

Paul Sanden (2012) breaks liveness down into six categories: 'temporal liveness' (happening in the present time), 'spatial liveness', 'liveness of fidelity', 'liveness of spontaneity', 'corporeal liveness', 'interactive liveness' (between performer and recipient), and 'virtual liveness' (Sanden, 2012: 11). He proposes that, 'each of these categories be observed in mediatized music as elements or areas of a dynamic network of relationships rather than as absolute values. … What often results, then, are what might usefully be called networks of liveness' (ibid.: 12). Based on both Auslander's original concept of a more fluid definition of the 'liveness' experience, and especially on the dimensions described in Sanden's 'networks of liveness' framework, the challenge for practitioners of technologically-mediated forms of music (in this case, the format of music performance through interactive video-calling), therefore, must be to enhance as many of these elements of liveness as are available to them.

The format of music-making through live video encounters, especially concerning health-musicking and music intervention programmes, is highly under-researched. Yet, when it comes to social intervention and support practices undertaken through online video-calling, the musical context is not the only aspect that seems essential to consider; general communication issues, such as carefully reading and understanding someone or building rapport with others, are equally important.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and caused a greater need for this, computer-mediated communication methods were already being explored as a possible way to help combat the issues of older people facing loneliness and perhaps not being easy to reach physically[10]. For example, Teo, Markwardt and Hinton (2019) concluded that older adults who frequently used video chat communication (as opposed to only text-based forms, such as email and social media platforms) had a significantly lower risk of depression.

It's also useful here to consider the study into video calls from elderly care residents to family members via an iPad by Zamir, Hennessy, Taylor and Jones (2018). This research reported that, although 'for those older people who used video calls they appeared very beneficial', recordings of the participants' mood changes in response to the activity were inconclusive (though this was mainly due to flaws in their data-collection methodology) (Zamir et al., 2019: 11). Similarly, through reviewing the literature on combating isolation through virtual means, Malinga, Schmidt and Wiysonge (2020) pointed out the lack of generalizable results:

> Given the very low certainty of the evidence, it is difficult to draw conclusions about which intervention can be effective to reduce social isolation and loneliness in the elderly. And research has shown that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing loneliness or social isolation; hence the need to tailor interventions to suit the needs of individuals, specific groups, or the degree of loneliness experienced. (Malinga et al., 2020: online)

These gaps in the existing research between music intervention practices and online communication, combined with social pressure to tackle the issue of elderly isolation/loneliness, support the validity of the research project presented in the current article. Moreover, the 'person-centred' and, thus, tailor-made approach already inherent in our *Music Near You* project corresponds with the 'no one-size-fits-all' issue mentioned above (and by several of the other studies presented in this review).

In accordance with these findings, the tailoring of virtual music-making to isolated elderly people in a person-centred manner appears to be a relevant and viable concept to develop, to potentially alleviate loneliness. What could such a format look like and, particularly, how can it call upon the self of

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[10] See Baker, Warburton, Waycott, Batchelor, Hoang, Dow, Ozanne and Vetere (2018) and Chen and Schulz (2016) for systematic literature reviews on the subject.

both participants and practitioners? What is more, given the immediacy of the musicians' response during the COVID-19 momentum in March 2020, the personal challenges that the pandemic caused to all involved, as well as (and importantly) the concerns over feelings of diminished humanness in virtual interaction, how can the musicians still pursue the person-centred values on which their work is based?

3.   Practice Development and Research Methodology

3.1   Research Aim and Question

The current study aims to explore the practice of the Mimic musician collective when they started a virtual person-centred music practice for vulnerable isolated elderly people, based on their shared legacy of non-virtual, 'physical', person-centred approaches[11].

The following research question stood central:

How can the Mimic musicians safeguard person-centredness in virtual musical interactions with vulnerable elderly people and their carers under COVID-19 isolation?

3.2   Practice Development

Through April – July 2020, two teams of two musicians each facilitated person-centred music-making sessions through video-calling with one participant (per team) of the day-care centre Goudvink, completing eight sessions per participant in total. The four musicians involved were all experts in person-centred music-making approaches with plenty of experience in working with vulnerable people, including hospitalized patients and people with dementia. Recruitment of participants was performed by a coordinator of the day-care centre in consultation with the musicians. Prior to the sessions, the best possible setup regarding hardware, software, and the positioning of instruments was explored.

Team A: Ms Mulder[12] and Her Daughter, Anita. Team A consisted of a male cellist (Dennis) and female violinist (Azra) with plenty of experience in working together. They played for Ms Mulder during each session, accompanied by her daughter Anita, who in daily life also acts as her informal carer. Throughout the sessions, the musical focus shifted from a varied range of repertoire towards more person-centred improvisation. At the same time, the feeling of a 'virtual concert space' developed into a more interactive, open session with the relationship becoming more informal and reciprocal. Key to this development was Anita's role, which gradually transformed from being a facilitator to becoming a more active participant. In some sessions, other family members also joined.

Team B: Stella and Her Carers. This team consisted of two female musicians: Marjo, a violinist, and Natalia, a multi-instrumentalist mainly playing the piano and harp. The two played for Stella, who resides in an assisted living facility for people with psychogeriatric conditions. Marjo and Natalia had never worked as a duo before. Stella required technical assistance with the iPad, which was taken care of by a member of staff on duty that day. This member of staff was also invited to take part in the session but, in practice, that did not always happen. The sessions were heavily oriented towards singing, as this was Stella's passion. During the project, the musicians overcame technical difficulties, due to the caregiver's challenges in managing the iPad connection, and developed a deepening relationship with Stella in which life experiences and emotional memories were shared.

3.3   Research Methodology

Given the study's aim to better understand the musicians' process of developing the virtual practice, the methodological approach of this study was ethnographic: studying people's actions and accounts in everyday contexts 'in the field' for an extended period of time. Some, more regular, ethnographic traditions (e.g., Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) were blended with traditions of auto-

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[11] See, for example, practices described in Smilde et al., 2014 and Smilde et al., 2019.
[12] All names are pseudonyms.

7

Person-centred music-making through video calls with isolated vulnerable elderly people and their carers during the COVID-19 pandemic

ethnography, where the practitioners study their own experiences (Freeman, 2015). Auto-ethnography seems applicable here, in the first place, through the earlier work of the first two authors (see, for example, Smilde et al., 2019; Dons, 2019; De Wit, 2020). In the second place, the first three authors combined their researcher role with that of a practitioner in the *Music Near You* practice, either as project coordinator (first author) or one of the musicians (second and third author). The fourth author did not participate in the practice itself but acted as a contributor to the theoretical framework, writer, editor, and critical eye. Musicians are considered here as 'reflective practitioners' (Schön, 1983) that seek to develop an appropriate practice for a specific group of people in specific circumstances through reflexive practice (Wakeling, 2014). Empirical data was therefore generated by the musicians themselves through joint and individual reflective writing. Reflective writing is the non-prescriptive documentation of experiences, thoughts, questions, ideas and conclusions about work in progress (Smilde, 2015). Such methods 'enable us to understand the reality in a profound way, from the community musician's perspective' (Smilde, 2018: 678).

Jointly Written Reflections. Each music practitioner duo was asked to, after each session, collectively report about the session and reflect upon aspects that stood out. Team A structured their joint writing consistently by listing the repertoire played, summarizing conversations and interactions and how musicians experienced them, describing challenges in terms of music-making and interaction, and describing changes in practical preparation, technical setup and implementation. Team B structured their report in their own way, differently each time. Generally, their report included a narrative description of what happened in the session and a concluding section with aspects to work on for next time. These aspects consisted of, for example, technicalities, repertoire, communication with staff or interaction with participants. The jointly written documents were shared between the teams and with the researchers after each session.

Individual Reflective Journal. Three of the four musicians kept a reflective journal, which is known to stir critical and analytical thinking about work in progress (Smilde et al., 2014; Smilde, 2015 after Schön, 1983). Musicians were asked to, after each session, answer the following questions:

> *What have you learnt?*
> *How do you experience developing a person-centred music practice virtually?*

In addition, three meetings between the teams took place during the course of the project to share experiences.

The qualitative data analysis involved 'the interpretation of meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 3). The coding process was thematic, constructed through three steps. (1) In light of the research question, a preliminary set of broad concepts was first produced based on a quick scan of all data and informed by the conceptual framework. (2) The set was then used as a starting point for coding data (Charmaz, 2014). (3) Finally, through discussions, a consensus was sought regarding the final codes, which were then clustered into three core categories: 'musical approach', 'social (virtual) space' and 'musicians' self-development'. Triangulation through the involvement of multiple researchers in data collection and data analysis was considered in order to increase validity. Also, because of the small sample and scale of the practice, the intention of the interpretation therefore was, therefore, to seek transferability rather than generalization.

4.   Results

4.1   Musical Approach
4.1.1   Setting Up a Virtual Environment

A good and reliable technical setup proved to be conditional for enabling the freedom and flexibility which person-centred musical interaction requires. In addition to musical instruments and a laptop, a good internet connection, camera, microphones, and extension cords allowing for freedom of movement completed the set of necessary hardware. Test-runs were performed to optimize audiovisual quality but also served as valuable mental support; as Azra wrote, 'since we cannot control the internet connection of both sides, maybe this was a way for us to feel that we are at least in control of something' (Azra, s1)[13]. The setup of hard- and software stayed relatively unchanged throughout the project.

Attention was given to creating an attractive camera image, for example, by minimizing visual background noise. Colour also proved to be important: when Stella (the participant of Team B) asked if something went wrong with the camera because everything seemed to be in black and white—the piano was black, the wall was white, and one of the musicians was wearing black and white—choices of what to wear were then considered more carefully.

The advantages of a visual side to the call became especially clear when Team B needed to carry out some of the sessions through a telephonic audio-only connection. After the following session, they reflected: '[h]aving the video [again] made a world of difference for our connectivity with Stella. This really felt like 'coming home' when we could see her again. And she said, too, that seeing us ... gave her a boost, which was missing last week!' (Team B, s5).

4.1.2   Tailoring Music

Migrating their person-centred work to a virtual environment prevented the musicians from using their regular 'offline' strategies to tailor the music to their participants. The '360 degrees radar' and co-presence with participants that musicians normally use to gauge atmospheres and read body language could no longer be relied upon. In addition, the framing of a camera limits the visual input on-screen, which brought the musicians to initially rely on verbal input only. Preserving the reciprocal nature of person-centred music-making was, therefore, a real challenge.

The musical strategies that emerged across the project could be roughly categorized into three types:

- *Musical gifts*: pieces of repertoire selected and arranged by the musicians for participants, i.e., with participants in mind
- *Requests*: pieces of repertoire mentioned by participants and then arranged and played by the musicians during a later session
- *Improvisations*: new music co-created in the moment, inspired by something participants tell or show (see section 4.1.3)

Whereas Team A organically opted for improvisation as a central role, and strategically programmed the music based on a variety of feelings for each session, Team B initially worked more from repertoire and let musical decisions be based more on Stella's input as she increasingly took the lead in the interactions.

4.1.3   Fostering Co-Creation

'Stella said there was thunder this morning. So, we asked if we could play Grieg's *Morning Mood* to create a different, more pleasant kind of mood. She agreed. Stella sang along and moved

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[13] Empirical data is referred to as follows (musician, session after which it was written).

to the music. She was also whistling bird sounds to the melody. ... Afterwards, we told her that we heard her whistling like a bird during the piece. Stella answered then, suddenly seriously and with a deep voice, that she cannot hear the birds singing through the noise in the building, which saddens her. … Marjo asked, 'then, shall we make a piece about the birds' singing?' Stella agreed. It was a sweet soundscape and thematic improvisation with violin and harp, sounding pleasantly light and bird-like. Stella hummed along with the repetitive motive. In the end, she said, 'bravo.'' (Team B, s3)

Person-centred improvisation, as a core strategy of a person-centred approach (Smilde et al., 2014; Smilde et al., 2019), entails participants jointly conceptualizing, and thus co-creating, a piece of (new) music. In such cases, musicians improvise on the basis of verbal and non-verbal input or 'clues' by participants or the space in which the music-making takes place. Sometimes participants are given a baton, whose movements the musicians then translate into music. The virtual format, in which musicians and audience are in separate locations, and the limitation of seeing only a fraction of participants and their surroundings, required the musicians to develop new strategies for gaining such input.

At the start, verbal interaction formed the major source of information for the musicians to rely upon for their tailor-made approach. In the sessions of Team A with Ms Mulder and her daughter Anita, stories of the family's previous trips to Thailand and a shared love for Eastern cultures, for example, emerged as an inspiration for the musicians to improvise on. This was seemingly a success, when Azra and Dennis created a piece based on the family's detailed description of a landscape: to Azra, it felt, 'almost like we were gazing at a painting that we created all together' (Azra, s7). The translation of their stories into music acted as a means to trigger a deeper process of reminiscence for Ms Mulder and Anita.

Such musical reminiscence seems to strongly relate to theories on identity empowerment and 'selfhood' mentioned earlier in this paper. In this case, we can see that the inspiration the musicians chose to base their improvisation on can be connected to Neisser's (1988) dimensions of the self—specifically, to the 'extended self' (being defined by one's personal memories) combined with the 'interpersonal-self' (defined by one's personal relationships: in this case, the shared experience of mother and daughter). Connecting this back to previous findings on the value of self-identity in programs designed to empower vulnerable participants, this result suggests that defining the self through personal memories can not only be meaningfully fostered through music but that this can even occur under the circumstances of a video-call.

Team B explored possibilities of expanding on the input for co-creation by also involving the physical space, such as physical objects in the private spaces. In the vignette above, for example, the sounds of Stella's daily life formed the source of inspiration for an improvisation piece. Similarly, when Stella introduced one of the paintings on her wall, the musicians used the painting as a source of inspiration for an improvisation piece. Such strategies also foster notions of Neisser's (1988) 'ecological self' (i.e., the self in its physical environment) and suggests that the virtual practice, as opposed to the majority of 'physical' practices taking place in common spaces, may be quite unique in that it allows one's personal, private space to become part of the music-making process.

4.2   The Social (Virtual) Space
4.2.1.   Liveness of the Experience

The musicians sought ways to compensate for the lack of physical co-presence with participants, in which they were not able to hear the music in its 'acoustically live' form. From Sanden's (2012) concept of 'networks of liveness', we can distinguish, in the musicians' reflections, multiple intentions of fostering liveness in alternative ways. Again, weaving the participants' physical life-world into the virtual setting of the music-making seemed a powerful resource for enhancing the feeling of liveness. An example of this is using a painting on the wall as inspiration:

'Stella drew the attention to the painting behind her on the wall: 'it gives me the feeling of beaming sun. ... It is important to me, as the artist does not live anymore.' We asked if we could make a piece about the painting, in regard to the sun rays. ... Afterwards, Stella analysed the music: 'it was calm and had lightness in it'.' (Team B, s5)

The example of the painting shows how person-centred music-making can connect two separate physical spaces and, thus, extends Sanden's (2012) dimension of 'spatial liveness'. In this case, instead of sounding acoustically live in the space of its initial utterance, the origin of a piece played in one space is drawn from a physical object in another space, bringing the two spaces together.
Sanden's 'interactive liveness' was fostered by the presence of a caregiver or family member. For example, when Stella's caregiver, Tom, joined in, the session gained a heightened sense of 'liveness':

'Stella seemed to be proud of our session and kind of 'performed' it a bit to (caregiver) Tom by humorously explaining what we have done so far and kind of 'hosting' the session for Tom. ... This added interaction in Stella's room … Tom seemed to 'fill' the virtual session more: made it livelier when she could share it with someone.' (Marjo, s6)

Additionally, the interactive nature at the phase of negotiating and conceptualizing a co-created piece contained a level of 'liveness of spontaneity' that was able to 'demonstrat[e] the spontaneity and unpredictability of human performance' (Sanden, 2012: 11), as well as a sense of 'interactive liveness' as it 'emerge[d] from various interactions between performing partners and/or between performers and listeners/viewers' (ibid.).

Openness, responsiveness and flexibility at the core of spontaneous liveness (see also, Sanden, 2012) and the values of person-centred music making (see also Smilde et al., 2014; Smilde et al., 2019) allowed the organic development of rituals: for example, when Stella initiated to read funny quotes from a book she had (e.g., 'I am so tired that I even dream of sleeping at night'). Each following session, she would read a new quote for the musicians. The quote at the last session enabled a meaningful end to the project for Team B when Stella recited, '[d]on't be sad it is ending, just smile that it was there to begin with' (Team B, s8).

4.2.2.   Relating to the Other

The musicians consciously sought appropriate ways to relate to their participants. Critical steps included learning how to address participants at the start and helping them to gain a sense of familiarity with the sessions. The musicians described a heightened attention to interpreting participants' facial expressions and body language as feedback on the suitability of the approaches and the quality of the virtual connection (e.g., thumbs-ups, smiling, frowning, etc.). These signals were important for creating virtual 'togetherness'.

As the music-making happened from the musicians' and participants' homes, blurring the lines of professional and private life was unavoidable. About session seven, Team A stated that 'the overall atmosphere was really warm and inviting, it felt like we were embraced' (Azra, s7). Earlier, Azra had already reflected on feeling welcome and accepted: '[i]t felt like we were on a house visit, sitting together and sharing something' (Azra, s6). Indeed, the musicians seemed to mutually experience something going beyond regular performing, and established a sense of informality quite early on in the project. This becomes clear from Marjo's writing after session two: '[i]t is about singing one's heart out, thinking of loved ones, and sharing emotions. Stella is so willing to share her stories with us that it is almost difficult to imagine that we have only seen each other twice during 20 min sessions' (Marjo, s2). The access to the other's private space thus may have actually accelerated the process of opening up. Here, the dimension of 'temporal liveness' (Sanden, 2012) seems to be at work, as the intensity and meaningfulness of the music-making were strongly bound to the moment where it unfolded.

11

Person-centred music-making through video calls with isolated vulnerable elderly people and their carers during the COVID-19 pandemic

4.2.3.   Quality of the Backstage Contact

Investing in the commitment and participation of the assisting caregiver or family member was crucial for ensuring the quality needed for the virtual space. To do this, the musicians established regular contact with the caregivers or the family member outside of the 20-minute session. This 'backstage' contact was used to schedule sessions and became an important way to monitor experiences and create a sense of safety for all.

For Team B, a lack of consistency on the side of the care unit remained a severe limitation for the musicians' work: backstage contact was not always secured. Additional flexibility was also needed when caregivers were unable to operate the iPad. But the commitment from the care staff involved more than just practical support with the iPad: mental support as well as respecting the musicians for the professional role they have within this practice were equally important. This supports the findings of the research that was done in similar conditions by Zamir et al. (2018). Like Team B in our study, Zamir et al. also discovered that one of the biggest barriers to the success of their programme was staff turnover and staff attitudes towards the technology and/or the project (ibid.).

Conversely, for Team A, careful preparation by Anita allowed the musicians to feel in control of the music-making throughout. Azra reflected on how Anita's support boosted the team's sense of control right from the first session:

> 'The connection was better than what I expected during this first session. … Another relief was that they had a speaker hooked on the iPad, so the sound quality on their side was also good. I believe this was an important step for us, especially for Dennis, to feel a little more in control of the sound that we produce.' (Azra, s1)

Maintaining a good rapport with the caregivers and family members helped in nurturing a safe space to develop the musical relationship. To maximize reciprocity, the musicians preferred that the daughter and carer would attend 'on-screen' with the participant, instead of 'behind the scenes'. Team A felt particularly supported by Anita when, for example, she encouraged her mother to take part in the musical co-creation by probing for input for new pieces and helping her to grasp the idea of improvisation by describing them as 'fantasy pieces'.

4.3   Musicians' Self-Development

Person-centredness requires musicians to self-manage well (Smilde et al., 2019), especially within a reciprocal relationship where musicians are required to balance their own needs and expectations with those of participants (Dons, 2019). The pandemic, affecting everyone, as well as the newness of using the virtual format, presented the musicians with personal challenges on many fronts—all in all, destabilizing the musicians' pre-established self-management system.

4.3.1   Managing One's Sense of Purpose

What stood out in all reflections after the first session was the musicians' joy at being able to play again for an audience, since losing that at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown. 'I felt that I had a purpose as a musician again!', Marjo (s1) wrote. Azra wrote (s1) that she felt 'more useful'. This shows how impactful the crisis had been on the self-esteem of the musicians. It may well be that the specific approach of *Music Near You* was (partly) responsible for boosting that self-esteem, as we can read in Azra's reflection:

> 'Due to the limitations of the virtual connection, our choice of repertoire is always pretty straightforward: violin, melody, and cello accompaniment. The improvisations, though, give us much more space to explore and, today, I felt … that especially Dennis could perhaps be more of his creative self.' (Azra, s7)

The project had a strong impact on cellist Dennis, who reflected on existential questions about himself as a musician in times of crisis:

'It is a mix of financial insecurity and more philosophical questions about the power and urgency of music (in the ways that I perform it). This [dent in self-esteem] came at the same moment as the beginning of this project and provided me with a dangerous cocktail of cynicism and insecurity. This feeling often came to me in the preparation for the sessions or during interactions. This provided a major block. I often felt that block stopping me from judging interactions positively. Now it seems like the block is being lifted slowly (even though the cynicism and insecurity remains, still), [now that] I can clearly see the effect of our sessions on Ms Mulder and her family.' (Dennis, s7)

Dennis reflects here on his insecurity about his future as a musician and how the project stirred his thinking. He seems to see things in a more positive light now, and he connects that to seeing the positive effects on the participants of this project. Dennis chose to be open about this internal crisis with the participants:

'To be able to work with music during this crisis is a gift, but at the same time, I am also greatly worried about the future. It helps to be open about this. During the phone calls with Anita, I sometimes dropped that these are crazy times for us ... That honesty about the situation is important for a successful exchange because, however professionally you prepare everything, you are always operating from your own situation.' (Dennis, s8)

Dennis feels it is important to be honest about his self-doubt. Just as honesty and authenticity in terms of artistic identity have been recognized as key for person-centred music-making (Smilde et al., 2014), Dennis also speaks out about his personal hardships to participants. He says that this 'helps'. It seems to be a form of self-protection, as if he is forgiving himself that there is only so much he can do at this moment.

4.3.2   Coping with Challenges

Throughout the project, both teams experienced various challenges in-practice. Not knowing how sound and image were experienced by participants persisted as a concern throughout all sessions. This also involved uncertainty about technical readiness on the other side. For Team B, the involvement of a member of staff to prepare the iPad for Stella became a factor often destabilizing the sessions and, once, when the iPad got lost, it prevented the session from taking place at all. During the first few sessions, the technical setup itself forced the musicians to take a problem-solving and 'learning by doing' attitude about, for example:

Transmission of sound:
'We need to take into account that our choice of music should avoid too much complexity— when the two voices are both playing complex lines it seems that there is too much musical information coming through which can be confusing for the listener.' (Team A, s1)

Delays:
'It is tricky to get used to singing 'in time' while you get the sing-along [coming] into your headphones with a delay.' (Team B, s1)

Eye-contact:
'We should try to look directly into the camera instead, however unnatural that feels, to make 'digital eye contact'.' (Team A, s1)

Unwanted noises:
'We were distracted by the loud noises: thumping, shaking, etc., on Stella's side.' (Team B, s5)

Input:
'The instability at the beginning was limiting us musically and interaction-wise as the input was so unclear to us visually and auditorily. We put the input sound lower so that our ears are not overwhelmed by the loud noises.' (Team B, s5)

The musicians also faced personal challenges. Insecurity and doubt caused turbulence at the start—for example, as Azra (s1) reflected: '[w]e had many questions on our minds before the session, especially 'is it really going to work?''. Marjo feared that technical issues of the virtual setup would hinder her capacity to communicate with Stella. Along the way, however, the lack of communication with the care staff became a major source of frustration which she had to overcome, especially when her efforts to solve the problem did not pay off. After the fourth session, she started to link the lack of engagement of the staff to the nature of the musicians' work:

'It feels disheartening not being valued for what we do. … It feels bad and frustrating. ... When I speak with the caregivers, I really feel like a total nuisance to them.' (Marjo, s4).

Marjo, here, explains the dysfunctional relationship with her work as a musician: she did not feel taken seriously as a professional. Furthermore, she became worried about how this would affect Stella:

'I feel that I cannot reach [the staff] on a "human level": they seem so focused on their work that it does not matter to them anymore what was agreed upon and that this project is really important for Stella. It breaks my heart a little.' (Marjo, s4).

With a few exceptions, the relationship with the staff did not improve much towards the last sessions. The musicians simply had to accept the situation. It may well be that the exclusively virtual contact—i.e., the impossibility of not meeting the staff in-person due to the COVID-19 regulations—is what kept it a real challenge.

The specific circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis further took their toll on the musicians in the practice itself. Azra, for example, experienced a lack of inspiration and difficulties in separating her responsibilities, which made her feel 'guilty' (Azra, s4), whereas Dennis had to come to peace with the idea of playing from his own home:

'I think that in order to have a completely open and honest exchange, both sides will have to open up their private space slightly. You cannot stay 100% business-like and professional. ... That way you can make music, improvise and talk in a more honest way.' (Dennis, s8)

The challenges required the musicians to be flexible, adapt where necessary and, sometimes, accept that something cannot be changed. Although this has been recognized in other, previous person-centred practices, it seems that the COVID-19 crisis brought the practitioners to perform such flexibility and adaptability on a more truly fundamental and personal level.

4.3.3   Seeking Growth

Earlier studies showed the importance for musicians to seek out personal meaning, satisfaction and growth in the (person-centred) work they do (Dons, 2019; Smilde et al., 2014; Smilde et al., 2019). Musical improvisation entails risk-taking and fully exposing one's musical identity, and therefore somewhat struggling with self-assurance and self-development (Smilde et al., 2014). Adding to that the novelty of the virtual format and the COVID-19 circumstances, it was therefore not self-evident that such personal revenues would be achieved.

Important signals were, for example, when the musicians reported feelings of personal enjoyment and starting to enjoy others' enjoyment:

'During the Ten Holt piece, I could see Ms Mulder and Anita sitting together with their eyes closed and just enjoying the music. I really loved this expression of serenity in their faces and I was glad that we could facilitate this moment for them.' (Azra, s5)

Recalling Azra's doubts about whether the practice was going to work (see 4.3.2), Azra's testimony, here, suggests that she was able to make mental space for enjoying others' enjoyment and, thus, seems to have come to a point where she could manage her experience of the new practice within the circumstances.

In other moments, the musicians took responsibility for their own growth. Although taking musical requests from participants was important in the reciprocal relationship with participants, to the musicians, however, the person-centred improvisations felt 'more motivating, meaningful and enriching than the repertoire' (Team B, s7). For this reason, Team B decided, along the way, to play more improvisations: '[w]e try to push a bit more improvisation by sharing one from us and one coming from her side. ... Stella can sing to us her favourite songs, but we do not necessarily need to arrange them' (Team B, s4). The fact that Team B consciously shifted to more improvising demonstrates their ability to be in control of managing their needs.

5.   Concluding Thoughts

In this article, we have explored how a group of musicians safeguarded the values of their existing shared practice of person-centred music-making when migrating to a virtual format within a relatively short amount of time. More research is needed to understand the long-term practice and its impact on participants and musicians.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the circumstances within which the musicians had to operate were challenging and perhaps life-changing, requiring them to act as true lifelong learners. We have shown examples of how the musicians managed to compensate for the lack of physical co-presence with participants by creating (new) virtual ways of making meaningful musical connections and invigorating a sense of 'liveness' through careful consideration of a few key factors:

1. The musical approach: careful deployment of technical means and interpersonal and musical strategies to most appropriately call upon the different 'selves' (Neisser, 1988) of all participants
2. The social (virtual) space: activating multiple aspects within the virtual environment that allow for meaningful connections and the co-construction of a 'network of liveness' (Sanden, 2012)
3. The musicians' self-development: coping with the exceptional circumstances and seeking growth within

Even though this was not the focus of this study, the research also showed that the programme *Music Near You* has the potential to create meaningful experiences for the people involved. Further research is needed to understand these experiences, and to consider the impact that virtual person-centred musical interactions, and perhaps also other art forms, could potentially make for people in times of crisis.

The conclusions suggest that a practice that is already based on a tailor-made approach, such as a person-centred one, is able to adapt quickly to new circumstances. In many ways, the virtual format did not approximate the visceral 'reading' of situations that is normally practised when tailoring music in person-centred practices. On the other hand, however, the access to one's private space that was established through the video call fostered a new and immediate personal connection between strangers. The virtual connection from home also enabled unanticipated music-making strategies to emerge (such as using paintings as inspiration for co-creation). Equally, this forced the musicians to expose their own

private life more than they were used to in other professional practices (for example when performing in a concert hall or a community setting). This may have accelerated and deepened the relationship.

The emergence of these new angles to person-centred music-making suggests that the act of 'safeguarding' the person-centred values of the musicians—which was the main focus of this study—certainly did not entail mere replication of existing methods, but rather confirms the fluid, flexible and context-bound nature of both the concept of person-centred music-making, as well as the attitude of its practitioners. What is more, it seems plausible that the success of the adaptivity of the practice to a virtual format was perfectly enabled by the 'here and now' improvisatory nature that characterizes person-centred approaches already. Additional research could help to better understand if and how the improvisatory nature of the musical approach can indeed invigorate the organisational structure and robustness of musical ensembles.

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