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Krueger Bridge, S ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8587-5719> (2023) The social value of music during the Covid-19 pandemic: Exploring the benefits of online music participation for social capital, education, belonging and wellbeing. Journal of Beliefs and Values: studies in religion

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To cite this article: Simone Krüger Bridge (2023) The social value of music during the COVID-19 pandemic: exploring the benefits of online music participation for social capital, education, belonging and wellbeing, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 44:4, 517-534, DOI: [10.1080/13617672.2023.2263723](https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2023.2263723)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2023.2263723>



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Published online: 03 Oct 2023.



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The social value of music during the COVID-19 pandemic: exploring the benefits of online music participation for social capital, education, belonging and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of The Digital Turn research project (2020–2021) that sought to understand, via qualitative research, the social value of online music participation offered by Liverpool Cathedral during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article will establish the context for the study, followed by the research methods for data collection and analysis, and the presentation and discussion of the results, which are grouped along four themes: Social Capital, Education, Belonging and Wellbeing. The results show that online music participation during the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced people's sense of social connectedness and belonging; provided important opportunities for formal and informal music education and learning and exposure to an eclectic range of musical styles; resonated with and reinforced participants' sense of shared identity and belonging; and enhanced people's general health and wellbeing, along with a sense of normality and routine. The article will conclude with the study's limitations and vision for future research.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 August 2023

Accepted 21 September 2023

KEYWORDS

Musical value; online music participation; Covid-19 pandemic; Cathedral science

Introduction

This article presents the findings of The Digital Turn research project (2020–2021) that sought to understand, via qualitative research, the social value of online music participation offered by Liverpool Cathedral during the COVID-19 pandemic (Krüger Bridge 2022). Under the strapline 'An encounter for every age', Liverpool Cathedral's music outreach programme encompasses interactive music sessions for babies and toddlers, a choice of choirs, music theory and instrumental tuition, a music programme for schools, and opportunities for music performance. Its participants range from children from birth to age ten; young people up to 18; and adults, including a community choir, Liverpool64, which attracts more than 100 singers of varying abilities. When the first lockdown was announced, all Liverpool Cathedral's music outreach activity moved online, and was delivered variously via pre-recorded podcasts, zoom and hybrid means. It henceforth played

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a vital role across social, educational, cultural and wellbeing dimensions for participants, which is the focus of this study. In the opening part, the article will establish the context for the study via consideration of three issues: the context of Liverpool Cathedral during the pandemic; the research fields in which the research is located; and the research questions arising from within this context. The subsequent part will introduce the research methods for data collection and analysis, followed by the presentation and discussion of the results on the social value of Liverpool Cathedral's online music outreach programme during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Liverpool Cathedral during the pandemic

In March 2020, the UK government announced a national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and shortly afterwards, lasting for approximately one year, Liverpool Cathedral's music outreach activities moved to online delivery. For instance, the Junior Choir was henceforth delivered via weekly pre-recorded podcast rehearsals, which followed a similar format to 'normal' rehearsals. By June 2020, the weekly Junior Choir and Liverpool64 Choir rehearsals were delivered live on zoom, alongside other online participatory activities, such as age-appropriate quizzes. Liverpool Cathedral's School of Music also created a music outreach group on Facebook to share news, information and 'how to' videos. With the partial easing of the lockdown in summer 2020, the choral autumn term was delivered in hybrid format, and switched back to online zoom delivery with the return to tightened restrictions in December, which continued well into the spring term 2021. Evensong services and other performances were replaced by virtual performances hosted on YouTube and produced via pre-recorded individual voices by members of the various choirs. For the Christmas season 2020, Liverpool Cathedral's Junior Choir performed a festive virtual recording of 'Do You Hear what I Hear' jointly with the Junior Choir from the Metropolitan Cathedral for, what would have been, Liverpool Cathedral's infamous annual Action for Children Christmas concert, which also included a virtual performance from Liverpool Cathedral's Schools Singing Programme schools and its regular Action for Children school choirs. Liverpool Cathedral's virtual performances thereby offered novel and nuanced ways for participants to engage with one another through spatial convergence afforded by video streaming technologies and digital interfaces (Rendell 2020).

When schools across the UK were closed with education switching to remote and online delivery for most children, Liverpool Cathedral's School of Music worked with small numbers of pupils from twelve schools in the Northwest to create a virtual recording that featured during the Action for Children virtual concert hosted by Channel 4's Jonathan Snow. Meanwhile, Liverpool Cathedral's Teeny Maestro sessions were delivered live via zoom, with instrumentation adapted to accommodate home music making. Liverpool Cathedral's School of Music also delivered individual instrumental tuition live on zoom, and held its annual Liverpool Cathedral Festival of Music twice online as a live stream on YouTube. The Music Theory programme similarly moved to online delivery via livestream on zoom, facilitating tutor-led teaching and participatory learning via screen share, work-book writing, question and answer, and instrument demonstrations by invited musicians.

Research context

This study is rooted in and contributes to four fields of research concerning: (1) the role of music in people's everyday lives; (2) the application of music for improving people's lives; (3) the role of music in helping people through the COVID-19 pandemic; and (4) the contribution of cathedrals to people and society.

First, the study contributes to newer academic music studies that ask questions about the role of music to people in everyday life (DeNora 2000; Finnegan 1989; Hesmondhalgh 2013; Pitts 2005) and music's sociocultural meanings (Clayton, Herbert, and Middleton 2012; Merriam 1964; Shepherd and Devine 2015). The emphasis is on ordinary music participants, and the people involved in transmitting everyday musical capacities, including music teachers and parents making music for and with their children. This focus differs from earlier music studies on musical value that typically focused on musical aesthetics, taste and class in Western art music (Levinson 2015; Weber 2015), and notions of genius, status, taste and class (Bourdieu 2010; DiMaggio 1982; Michelsen 2015; Peterson 2015; Weber 1975). This study thus adopts newer perspectives in music studies, asking questions about the sociocultural value and meaning of music participation in ordinary people's everyday lives.

Second, the study makes a contribution to applied music scholarship that aims to harness the benefits of music for improving people's lives. This area of research resonates with a growing trend in UK government policies and funding that seeks to evaluate and promote musical activity and education among the population, including children (Arts Council England 2021; Carnwath and Brown 2014; Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Department for Education 2022; National Music Council 2009; Nordicity 2020). Applied music scholarship addresses, for instance, the 'power' of music in education (Hallam 2015; Hallam and Himonides 2022), including music outreach education (Baker 2021; Creech et al. 2016), and the value of music to people's health and wellbeing (MacDonald, Kreutz, and Mitchell 2012). This study thus asked questions about the applied benefit of Liverpool Cathedral's online music activities for participants' education and health and wellbeing during the pandemic.

Third, the study makes a contribution to recently emerging research on music activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is broadly divided into two research camps: One camp has highlighted the challenges faced by cultural practitioners, organisations and audiences by studying the devastating impact on the creative industries internationally (Carr 2022), the UK (Impact of COVID-19 Project 2021) and regionally (Anderson and Flynn 2020; Carr 2020), including the impact on cultural participation (The Audience Agency 2020), employment (O'Brien, Taylor, and Owen 2020) and cultural workers' experiences in the creative industries (Gray and Wright 2021). The other camp has sought to show the benefits of music during the pandemic, for example for mood regulation (Hennessey et al. 2021), social connectedness (Vandenberg, Berghman, and Schaap 2021) and health and wellbeing (Williams et al. 2021). This study is informed by research in the latter camp, asking questions on whether, why and how online music participation helped people through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fourth, this study contributes to the newer field of the science of cathedral studies (Francis 2015), which draws predominantly on theory and scientific approaches in the scientific study of religion and empirical theology to highlight

the wider contribution made for people participating in cathedrals' cultural and educational activities (McKenna, Francis, and Stewart 2022), including the positive impacts of cathedral events on people's health and wellbeing (Francis and Jones 2020; Francis et al. 2020, 2021; Francis, Jones, and McKenna 2020, 2021; Pike 2022). Research in the science of cathedral studies contributes concrete, predominantly quantitative evidence to a growing national interest in the contributions made by cathedrals to their local economies, including the social benefits they generate through services and outreach activities (Ecorys 2014, 2021; Ecotec 2004), which clearly differs to academic research on music and worship more generally (McGann 2002; Sloboda 2000). This study is similarly interested in the contribution made by cathedrals beyond worship, thus adding a qualitative dimension to the science of cathedral studies.

Research question

The research question is: What is the social value of online music participation offered by Liverpool Cathedral during the COVID-19 pandemic? Two sub-questions asked more specifically about (1) the value of music participation, and (2) the value of online music participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, which supported comparative perspectives pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, while sub-questions informed the subsequent methods for data collection:

1. What do children and adolescents and their families and adults perceive to be the social, cultural, educational and wellbeing value of Liverpool Cathedral's music outreach programme?

- Which activities are you/your child participating in?
- How long have you participated in this activity?
- Why you/your child joined the activity?

2. How has music participation been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what do participants perceive to be the social, cultural, educational and wellbeing value of their online music participation?

- Which online activities did you/your child participate in?
- Describe your/your child's online experience.
- What is the social value of your online music participation?
- What do you think of the educational value?
- Do you think that your/your child's participation in the Cathedral's music programme has cultural value?
- Does your/your child's online music participation have any values during the pandemic related to wellbeing and/or (mental) health?

Method

This study is rooted in interpretivism, relying on observation and questioning to discover and generate a rich and deep understanding of the social value of online music

participation offered by Liverpool Cathedral during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methods used to answer the research questions involved a qualitative examination of the social value of pre-pandemic and online music participation, and generated understandings of how participation in Liverpool Cathedral's music outreach programme helped participants to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic. The methods involved three approaches.

First, the study was underpinned by the researcher's own experience-based ethnographic position as both a long-standing parent of a Junior Choir child and chorister and weekly participant-observer of Liverpool Cathedral's online rehearsals and classes since the start of the pandemic in 2019 (Hine 2000), which enabled a holistic and inclusive focus on the social value of online music, including deeper insights into participants' experiences, including children, and due contextualisation into a hitherto unfamiliar field of music study. While the ethnographic research approach has, over the last few decades, become commonplace in music studies, the researcher observed and documented online music activities, collaborated with participants in their responses to these activities, and observed and documented these responses (Curran and Radhakrishnan 2021, 104). Ethnographic research data were captured in the form of fieldnotes and audiovisual data, which in turn informed the design of the online questionnaire.

Second, an online questionnaire was designed in the university-approved OnlineSurveys software, which contained eight questions, each offering a qualitative data group of answer choices describing qualities or characteristics relevant to each question, which engaged deeper-level cognitive reflections (Allanson and Notar 2019), followed by open-ended question prompts, such as 'Please explain your answer(s)'; a further two questionnaire questions were entirely text-based.¹ Questionnaire participants were recruited using convenience sampling: The questionnaire link was distributed via email to all adult and parent participants by Mr Stephen Mannings and Mrs Tara Delve, who acted as gatekeepers for the research, complemented by callouts during online and in-person rehearsals and sessions. As the research progressed, the questionnaire was also distributed in print format when the researcher attended and observed choir rehearsals in order to reach especially elderly choir members. The questionnaire returned a total of 57 responses, including statistics based on the qualitative data group of answer choices and 12,200 words text-based qualitative responses for subsequent analysis.

Third, open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted via zoom with 15 volunteering adult singers and parents of choir children to explore the questionnaire data in more depth, and to capture a deeper level of qualitative perspectives and meanings. Recruitment followed the voluntary provision of contact details (email, phone) via the questionnaire, followed by meetings on zoom that lasted 30 to 45 minutes during June/July 2021. The interview questions focused on music participation prior to and during the pandemic, and the connection between online music participation and value, yet also allowed flexibility for interviewees to provide longer anecdotes and stories of specific experiences about which they chose to talk about. The interviews were recorded through zoom software and subsequently transcribed by a research assistant.

The data analysis was informed by an interpretative theoretical framework and qualitative data analysis approach to systematise, analyse and interpret all data collected through questionnaire, observations and interviews. First, utilising the in-built analysis

tool in OnlineSurveys, the researcher evaluated the multiple-choice qualitative data group of answer choices to reveal overall patterns of music participation and people's perceptions, and to identify patterns and themes behind the data. Second, analytical induction and thematic analysis of qualitative text-based data from the observations, questionnaire and interviews was conducted, for which the researcher developed a coding framework using concepts from the questionnaire and interview topics and organising these into themes that derived from the content. The documentary method subsequently helped to answer the question of how people's online music participation is realised by focusing on the incorporated, tacit knowledge (Bohnsack, Pfaff, and Weller 2010), which allowed to take a deeper look into the underlying mechanisms between online music participation activities and their value.

Results and discussion

The data revealed the following patterns of music participation at Liverpool Cathedral: The majority of research participants attended the outreach choirs, Liverpool64 Choir (64%), Junior Choir (14%) and Gilbert Scott Youth Choir (13%), of whom the majority joined LC's music activity prior to the pandemic (81%) and had thus experienced rehearsals and performances within the impressive interior of Liverpool Cathedral prior to switching to online and/or blended practice. Some respondents attended the online music theory classes (13%), Teeny Maestro baby sessions (7%) and other music activities (13%), including online ukulele lessons, Liverpool Cathedral Choir and Teeny Maestro baby sessions. Only 11 participants joined less than 12 months ago during the COVID-19 pandemic, who were predominantly child and adolescent participants in music theory courses, and baby participants, and thus had solely online music experiences. Based on the collected data, the results could be grouped in four themes: social, educational, cultural and wellbeing. These are presented in the next four sections.

Social benefits of music

Musical participation, including choral singing, is of social value (Weinstein et al. 2016) and enhances people's 'social capital' (Jones and Langston 2012), which inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons, and arises from the interdependence between individuals and between groups of people (Prest 2016). Music activities, such as choral singing, provide temporary non-threatening settings and social contexts in which to see, talk, laugh, feel emotions with like-minded people (Scheve Von and Salmela 2014, 41). Participating in choirs enhances social inclusion and group identity through a shared sense of unity and togetherness (Rimmer 2013), and thereby create meaning in people's lives, including children. Participating in shared music activities enhances self-esteem, motivation, communication skills and social skills, which are essential for people's social and mental wellbeing (Ros-Morente et al. 2019). This study similarly showed that many participants valued greatly 'to be part of a choir', as it enhanced their social capital via interactions and friendships and has been recognised to have both immediate and long-term positive effects on

social and emotional aspects of people's lives (Diwase 2018). Anna, a member of the Liverpool64 choir, explained:

I really feel it [Liverpool64 choir] is a good glue that keeps people together and keeps people focused, happy, very positive; it is lovely I think it helps on so many levels. I love the singing; I love the songs; I love the social style; I love being in the Cathedral; I love the music. It is just, it is very fulfilling in all areas, it has been brilliant, I love it. (Interview, Anna, 30 July 2021)

Music can engender sociability in a way that 'embraces the feeling of belonging to a group, a family, a community or a nation [and] the feeling of togetherness through the performance of music' (Riedel 1964, 149). This shared sociability during music participation was of similar importance during the pandemic. Many participants felt a lack of control, anxiety and loneliness because of the government's imposed social isolation, and thus experienced relief, joy and hope when participating in online music (Daffern, Balmer, and Brereton 2021). The majority of questionnaire participants enjoyed the online music activities (77%) and appreciated the choral leader and/or teacher (77%), since it maintained some normality (71%), they felt connected to other people (64%), the music activity made them feel good (69%), they had fun (52%) and appreciated seeing their friends (41%) as a result of their online music participation. To some participants, it was important for music sessions to be live streamed, so that they knew everyone is involved in the same activity at the same time, which created a feeling of being part of something bigger than themselves (see also Vandenberg, Berghman, and Schaap 2021). Thus, 'keeping in touch' and 'social contact' during the lockdowns meant that the online choirs became 'a highlight of the week' and 'a bit of normality'.

The regular online activities provided much needed structure, distraction and enjoyment during challenging times for both adults and children, along with a sense of normality and routine. Williams et al. (2021) similarly found that online music sessions in lockdown were important for giving people meaning and creating important opportunities for social interaction. This meant that many participants at Liverpool Cathedral 'enjoyed the activities and social aspect' and valued the continued routine and social contact during the choir rehearsals. One participant explained that 'being at home was not a good experience. To have a social contact and a very good learning together session helped enormously'. Those participants who were shielding emphasised even more the critical importance of maintaining social contact through their online music participation, particularly those forced into complete social isolation. The social benefits of online music participation were similarly important to children, with parents commenting that 'It was particularly good for my child to have contact with other children during lockdown' and 'this activity [was] positive for my daughter'. Given that sessions were attended on screen in children's home environments meant that children and their parents could share the learning experience:

Me and my child learnt together. I have no musical education and love the fact that I learn new things along with him. (Questionnaire, 12 Jul 2021)

To parents of babies, Teeny Maestro online sessions provided a hugely important relief from the pandemic and social impetus during first-time parenting, given that most baby

participants were all born into this bizarre, socially distanced, face-masked, computer screen version of the world. Online music participation brought numerous social, cognitive, developmental and emotional benefits. For example, Teeny Maestro online classes helped parents to soothe their babies through music, creating healthy associations, strengthening parent-child social and emotional connections. One parent explained:

For me it was really helpful learning how to introduce musical ideas to my little one in a way that would be engaging and would keep her interested. I learnt so much and was able to gain confidence in helping my little one to learn as well. My little one loves Tara and was mesmerized by her teaching on the screen! (Questionnaire, 12 Jul 2021)

The benefit of music participation for acquiring social capital is clear. Music participation triggers empathy and trust for one another, heightened oxytocin levels and improved cultural cohesion (Suttie 2015). It enhances behavioural and educational development, with the potential to increase IQ levels, employment chances and socioeconomic status (Zoritch, Roberts, and Oakley 2000) and correlates with verbal articulation (Berthomier and October 2018; Rudolph-Fladd and Carver 2023, 29–30), while passing on important knowledge and cultural heritage and educational foundations. Exposure to music making helps to release energy, to develop motor skills, and to socialise with other children, while sustained music participation can enhance important key skills due to the longer periods of concentration and determination (DeVries 2004; Williamson 2014). Music is fundamentally social, communicative and embodied, which has related benefits for education and learning.

Education and learning

Music participation is educationally meaningful and valuable under normal pre-pandemic conditions, allowing participants to develop theoretical and musical knowledge, and performance abilities. Educational research highlights that children's participation in music supports self-confidence, self-esteem, relationship building and a sense of belonging, triggering educational positives, such as enhanced creativity, better memory and greater development of literacy and language skills (Department for Education 2022; Hallam 2015; Hallam and Himonides 2022). At Liverpool Cathedral, it was also the performance of more challenging choral music that triggered a certain sense of achievement and excitement, such as when Liverpool64 learned to perform *The Armed Man*:

I think it was spring, there was a performance of ... *The Armed Man*. So yes, I've participated in the big events in the Cathedral as well ... It was absolutely wonderful. It is brilliant music and there were so many people involved ... It is a composition for peace ... and the text that we used was also beautiful; just everything about it, a brilliant piece of work ... it is just a wonderful piece of music to be involved in. (Interview, Janet, 30 July 2021)

Considering the disruption to music learning and education during the pandemic (Camlin and Lisboa 2021), the study revealed the huge significance of continued music education for participants, who positively emphasised that 'Stephen et al. have kept us focused on learning new music'. During the pandemic, the majority of questionnaire participants wished to improve their singing voice (71%). Reflecting on online choral practice, rehearsing in four vocal parts (SATB) was

‘good for practising the parts and learn it in isolation from the other voices’. Even those participants who were ‘unable to attend all online meetings’ still ‘appreciate[d] being able to practise the music at home during lockdown months’. Many participants expressed omnivorous musical preferences (54%), including an enjoyment of popular music pieces (50%) as compared to learning about sacred music (40%). Participants often said that they ‘enjoy learning new pieces in different styles’ and they ‘like a mixture of modern and religious’, which shows that the historically sustained ‘elite-to-mass theory’ (Peterson 2015, 154) is untenable and that people’s musical tastes and practices are not necessarily defined by their class background (Finnegan 1989).

Children, too, enjoyed the eclectic music repertoire: ‘My daughter loves singing different genres of music’, and ‘2 kids mainly love sacred music, 1 kid loves pop music more’. The musical variety was thus regarded as something positive that can open people’s minds, since ‘all music teaches something new’. Around half also appreciated to learn new things about music (48%) and deemed learning about music to be important (40%). Even fewer participants felt that learning to read musical notation was important (29%), or to understand music theory (27%) and to work towards music exams (12%). Even so, it is important to recognise that the different music activities across choral participation, music making and music theory courses had different educational value. Liverpool64’s adult participants often agreed that ‘I also want to improve my sight reading/singing’, and that ‘I enjoy improving sight reading’, and that ‘I like to understand what I’m singing whether it’s notation/language our leaders would explain’. This emphasis wasn’t as much a priority for Junior Choir children. For instance, one parent regarded children’s educational development as more ‘indirect’ due to greater emphasis on the development of the singing voice and more general, transferable skills, alongside acquaintance with a wider and fun musical repertoire, while some even progress to become a chorister:

Our son’s voice has developed beautifully since singing in the choir. He has basically a beautiful head voice. The pieces are good fun too, especially when the children sang the Christmas carols and songs. There are always some popular fun pieces too, like the one about the laughing hyenas and other animals. Mr Mannings is very energetic and lively, and zoom meant our son can see him close up rather than at a distance. The educational development is probably more indirect when singing in a choir. Our son didn’t learn that much about the music itself or music theory or so. Singing in a choir is more about coordination, listening, following the conductor, reading the words, and those sorts of skills, which can be very important for children’s general development. (Questionnaire, 8 May 2021)

By contrast, participating in online music theory courses via instructor-led zoom sessions resembled more closely formal music education and learning (Daubney and Fautley 2020). One parent reflected that ‘my daughter is doing her grade 4/5 theory and wanted to learn more so took up this course during lockdown; it also helped with the sight-reading side of music’. The different online music activities thus offered novel opportunities to participants to experience formal and more informal music education (Green 2008).

Belonging and identity

Belonging to Liverpool Cathedral and what it stands for also resonates with, reinforces and constructs a sense of shared identity and memory. It holds a special place in the hearts many people, evoking sensory experiences and emotions though awe and wonder, while capturing people's appreciation for beauty in the church's physical and social contexts (Álvarez-Morales, Lopez, and Álvarez-Corbacho 2020; Bagenal 1930). Dr Chris Newton explained, 'I think the real value here is the place, the meaning of the place ... greatness to the feeling of being here, of being part of a place like this'. (Interview, 31 July 2021). Memory is evoked through the shared musical experiences inside the Cathedral and informed by the values and practices of its community, which is reinforced by music's ability to evoke the past, of how people remember history, such as the loss of a loved one, a past event, or a distant homeland (Marsh 2012), framing their understanding of it and the social groups associated with it. Indeed, 'musical structures may provide a grid or grammar for the temporal structures of emotional and embodied patterns as they were originally experienced' (DeNora 2000, 68). The religious context of music participation plays a significant role, particularly for adult choir participants, who 'really enjoy singing choral music'. To Janet, a Liverpool64 choir member, English choral music evoked important notions of English identity:

Having lived in other countries, I find that the English sacred music tradition is one worth preserving, and I am glad to be able to be preserving that because it's a massive part of our heritage ... I've lived in France and there is choral tradition there, of course, and I've lived in Germany, and I've lived in the States and was fortunate to be part of a Cathedral choir in Indianapolis, and I found that a lot was English choral music. And it was a wonderful link with home, and it helped to be able to continue singing those pieces there. And so, I feel privileged to be able to be part of that. (Interview, Janet, 30 July 2021)

Most participants expressed pride, affinity and prestige about their connection to Liverpool Cathedral, including respect for their choral leaders (87%), including a perception of their 'excellent musical skills!'. The majority of people also felt proud about their affiliation with Liverpool Cathedral (80%) and its emphasis on musical excellence: '[I'm] very proud when we have the opportunity to sing in the Cathedral especially with the great choir' and 'proud to join in the Cathedral events'. The majority of respondents thereby agreed on the excellent musical quality (78%), and a feeling of connectedness to Liverpool Cathedral. Nearly half the respondents agreed on the notion of prestige (44%), commenting that Liverpool Cathedral is 'a superb place to rehearse and perform' and that [they] 'feel privileged to be able to be part of the choir at the Cathedral'. Anne, a Liverpool64 choir member, explained her feelings of affiliation to Liverpool Cathedral as follows:

I didn't realize it was attached to the Cathedral at first ... I've always loved the Cathedral. I love the architecture there. I love the feeling in the choir in the Cathedral. And one of the first times, it was the first Christmas, and we did the Bell Carol, and we did it under the bridge and we did it unaccompanied ... and it sounded gorgeous. I was so pleased with it ... But yeah, I do feel very proud of being in the Cathedral Choir now. (Interview, 30 July 2021)

Participating in Liverpool Cathedral's musical activities also impacted on some people's participation in other activities (40%) and/or support of the Cathedral more widely, for example through donations (27%). One Liverpool64 participant commented that, 'before

[I] would visit occasionally and now visit more regularly (before lockdown that is!) and will do again'. Another participant of the Liverpool64 choir, whose child is a chorister, said that they 'support cathedral in all aspects – the cathedral choir has become a big part of our families' life and they feel like a second family'. Less significant to the respondents was the comparative perspective, as only a minority of respondents selected a preference towards Liverpool Cathedral's choirs as compared to other choirs (29%). While class is historically engrained in churches, representing status and power in society, Liverpool Cathedral nowadays presents a far more eclectic and inclusive space, which was equally important during the pandemic, while its online music outreach programme played a significant role in enhancing people's health and wellbeing.

Health and wellbeing

It is widely accepted that musical engagement can enhance general wellbeing in the population (MacDonald, Kreutz, and Mitchell 2012), a much-needed necessity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Levstek et al. 2021). For instance, Hennessey et al. (2021) showed that people's mental health, which was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to heightened rates of anxiety and depression (Carlson et al. 2021), improved by listening to and playing music, while balancing mood and promoting a positive outlook. The study similarly showed that singing in Liverpool Cathedral's choirs impacted positively on participants' sense of health and wellbeing, which was experienced as 'a positive, enjoyable thing to do', as is 'being a part of something'. While some participants 'didn't value online [participation]' and 'felt less connected to people than when physically attending choir', the positive impacts of in-person musical engagement extended to most participants during the pandemic, whereby some participants suggested that they 'felt happy after zooms' and 'feeling part of something that was still going on whilst everything else was on pause helped wellbeing'. To many participants, the online music activity 'gave me something to look forward to, to have a few hours of singing and to briefly catch up with friends'. Most significant to questionnaire respondents was that participating in Liverpool Cathedral's online music activities made them feel good (87%), particularly 'singing [which] is always a good vent for anxiety', since 'singing has a positive impact – makes you feel good', and 'singing is good for my mental health and I always feel good after'. One Liverpool64 participant explained the importance of singing as follows:

Even the simulation of singing together brings some of the considerable benefits associated with choir membership. My knowledge of the music improved & my confidence, which would have been hard to maintain without any online practice. There is still a boost to motivation & mood & it was often easier to attend online so my participation was greater than it otherwise could have been. (Questionnaire, 7 June 2021)

The regular online music sessions also gave some structure to the week (83%), and enhanced many participants' perceptions of social connectedness (70%), notably for those participants who were shielding during the lockdowns, who commented that their online music participation 'was a release from being indoors', 'helped with the frustration, boredom and loneliness', 'played major part in staying sensible and in good spirits', and 'gave focus to my week and also enabled me to keep in touch with my friends

and choir members'. To most children, the social benefits of continued music participation were similarly important, with parents commenting that 'It was particularly good for my child to have contact with other children during lockdown', and 'This activity is positive for my daughter'. Many participants were thus looking forward to the online musical activity (70%) and regarded it as the 'highlight of the week'. For instance, one parent explained that 'she [daughter] enjoyed the lessons [which] gave her routine and she was happier after the lessons'. Another parent agreed that:

The sessions with the choir and also the theory courses definitely helped my son, it gave some structure to the week rather than the days blending into one, they gave him ways to interact with others and all the while, getting the buzz from learning something new. (Questionnaire, 11 May 2021)

More than half of the participants felt that their online music participation helped them to get through the lockdown (54%) and provided important distraction from the pandemic (44%), saying that 'It definitely gave me a chance to forget about other worries of the week'. To many respondents, their online music participation helped to relieve stress and anxiety (35%), which meant that 'I always feel on a high after rehearsing and performing', and that the online music activities were 'something positive to relieve the isolation & boredom'. One participant even exclaimed, 'I thrived in lockdown!'

Conclusions

People's social and cultural experiences, education and wellbeing has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study presents empirical qualitative research on the social value of online music participation at Liverpool Cathedral during these uncertain and unprecedented times. The key outcomes of the research were grouped along four themes. First, under conditions of social restrictions during the global pandemic crisis, online music participation resulted in social capital, enhancing people's sense of social connectedness and belonging during the lockdowns. Music participation is inherently social, both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, and this shared online sociability was significant for people, who felt relief, joy and hope when participating in Liverpool Cathedral's online music activities. Second, Liverpool Cathedral's online music programme provided important opportunities for music education and learning during the pandemic, notably for voice training and sight-singing, and also for being exposed to an eclectic range of musical styles, while enabling participants to experience formal and informal forms of music education. Third, people feel a great sense of pride, affinity and prestige about their connection to Liverpool Cathedral, which was similarly important during the global pandemic crisis. Belonging to Liverpool Cathedral and what it stands for – excellence, emotions, beauty – resonated with and reinforced participants' sense of shared identity and belonging, and thus held a special place in the hearts of participants during the pandemic. Finally, online music participation enhanced people's general health and wellbeing, and provided much needed distraction, structure and enjoyment during very challenging times for both adults and children, along with a sense of normality and routine. Online music participation was thus meaningful and useful to people for coping with the negative consequences of the pandemic, for supporting resilience on individual and community levels, and for helping affect regulation.

Limitations of the present study

There are obvious methodological limitations to this qualitative study, given the relatively small number of questionnaire respondents and interviewees. As the data were collected from participants at Liverpool Cathedral, it is unknown to what degree these results generalise to explain the value of online music participation in other contexts. The qualitative data were additionally limited by inconsistency in how much detail was provided by participants and the lack of opportunity for systematic follow-up. As the current data include mainly locally based participants, further research is also necessary to clarify how online music participation may be affected by differing sociodemographic backgrounds or socio-political contexts. The ability to use internet and technology, along with ‘internet problems’, ‘connection problems’ and other commitments impacted on some people’s perceptions and experiences, and, in turn, impacted on their questionnaire responses and willingness to participate in zoom interviews. In some instances, participants simply found it hard and challenging to engage online, given that a computer screen was a ‘new’ environment for many participants, and that technical issues like slowdowns and speed loss, server outages and crashes seriously hampered motivation. During choir rehearsals on zoom, participants had to be muted, which in turn hampered some participants’ perceptions of the value of online singing. Despite these limitations, however, the current results suggest that online music participation provided a potentially effective resource for coping during the pandemic, corroborating previous work and revealing new directions for gaining a further understanding how music helps us to cope with crisis. The research provides concrete evidence, through qualitative empirical data, of the positive impact that online engagement with music had on participants’ experiences and coping strategies in times of spatial distancing.

Vision for future research

It is of significant concern that the recent return to in-person music participation may enhance people’s abilities to cope with and recover from the pandemic, and be conducive to long-term consequences for education, belonging and wellbeing (Spanner 2022). Indeed, many participants in Liverpool Cathedral’s online music activities, who ‘kept going’ during the pandemic, ‘came back to our first rehearsal to the cathedral because of what zoom had done They came back with full energy and confident. There was nobody lacking confidence. And I think that is because what we did with Zoom’. (Interview, Chris Newton, 31 July 2021). This sense of positivity and confidence among many of Liverpool Cathedral’s music participants shows the value of online music participation in the transition to post-Covid-19 society. This is the concern of continued research funded by the British Academy that sheds light on how in-person music participation provides efficient strategies in the aftermath of the still ongoing pandemic and in the transition to post-Covid-19 society.

Note

1. The full questionnaire, including questions and results, are publicly available under the following link: <https://trackimpact.org/project/eu-west-1/9745/evidence>.

Acknowledgments

The research has relied greatly on the exceptional support of a number of key people, notably my questionnaire and interview participants, and I'd like to thank them all for their time and insights. I sincerely thank The Revd Canon Prof. Leslie J. Francis for inviting me to contribute this article to the special issue on cathedral studies, along with his excellent editorial comments on various stages of the manuscript. I am continuously grateful to Mr Stephen Mannings, Mrs Tara Delve, The Very Revd Prof. Sue Jones, Canon Nick Basson, Dr Christopher Newton, Mr Lee Ward, and everyone at Liverpool Cathedral for continuing to support this research and its dissemination. The research was supported financially by Liverpool John Moores University.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research was supported financially by Liverpool John Moores University.

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