Performing Artists in the age of COVID-19: A moment of urgent action and potential change

In this special long read, Drs Ioannis Tsioulakis and Ali FitzGibbon take an indepth look at the devastating impact the COVID pandemic is having on the performing arts sector.

Working populations across the world are seeing their livelihoods and careers collapse or transform overnight as a result of the global pandemic COVID-19 and the responses of individual governments. Cultural work and the focus of our contribution here – performing arts (music and theatre) – is affected more than many other occupations. This is because performing artists work in extremely precarious
conditions, their careers and mental health have been made additionally vulnerable by prolonged austerity, and proposed solutions thus far are inadequate and based on misunderstandings. Both immediate action and a long-term approach are needed to ensure a critical workforce is not abandoned.

Our respective research over many years has studied music and theatre artists in the UK, Ireland and Greece. In close collaboration with these performing practitioners, our work has shown that making a living from the creative industries is precarious and fragile, and those conditions were exacerbated in the last two decades by a series of global and domestic economic crises.

What we know is that the sudden and radical effect of COVID-19 on the lives of freelance performing artists is compounding dangerous levels of precarity in these occupations and, as a result, there are swifter, deeper and more serious consequences to policy inaction in the coming months and years. The existing crisis in performing arts is one of long-term precarity and insecurity (https://www.creativeindustriesfederation.com/sites/default/files/2017-07/Creative%20Freelancers%201.0.pdf), which has already generated widespread problems of inequality (https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/c35ef375-9fb4-4753-8e7db9088ef68d25/downloads/Counting%20the%20Music%20Industry%20summary%202019.pdf?ver=1576691396956), lack of diversity, and poor mental health. What our contact with musicians and theatremakers in recent weeks has shown us is not only the fragility of the lives and livelihoods of these occupations but also the failure of governments and public agencies to understand the nature of this work or the gaps in existing support systems. Further, drawing on our ongoing research and conversations with performing artists in Ireland, UK and Greece, we believe policy responses announced to date betray problematic assumptions about how performing artists can or should be ‘productive’ in the midst of a global pandemic.

**What are the principal issues?**

The precarity of our cultural labour force has been written about extensively over many years. The cultural and creative industries of which performing arts is a part are widely understood to display higher levels of freelance and short-term contract working. Research conducted by academics[1] (https://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue41/amcrobbie41.pdf), by representative bodies (https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/Files/Reports/Industry/The-Working-Musician-report), and by public agencies (http://www.arts council-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/LWCA_Study_NI_Full_Version_(with.preface).pdf) has repeatedly shown that income levels for artists within these industries is not only extremely low but also lower than their ‘non-creative’ counterparts in the same industries (we nod to the work of Roberta Comunian and colleagues (https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1435-5957.2010.00281.x) among others). This makes this workforce more vulnerable to a ‘pandemic insolvency (https://medium.com/@BueRubner/pandemic-insolvency-why-this-economic-crisis-will-be-different-841d5bbfa737’) by intensifying the associated challenges of freelance precarious work: being unprotected by employment regulations, unable to afford a basic standard of life (families, mortgages, care for relatives), generate savings and pension, or plan for the future. While we know this has affected freelancers (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xJ8JPLYb1M) across the creative industries and in other artforms, we focus here on those we have been working with and researching: self-employed performing artists.

As the pandemic hit Europe and venues started to cancel events or close, we know that not only did musicians and theatre artists lose immediate work but they had little contractual protection for future cancellations. As an example, the Greek Musicians’ Union (https://pmu.gr/?p=777) explains that most of its members are employed either with fixed-term contracts that under-represent their workload, or without any official contracts at all. None of these arrangements include contingency mechanisms for compensation if work is not carried out as planned.

Those concerns are also echoed by the UK Musicians’ Union (https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/Home/Advice/covid-19/Taking-Action-to-Protect-Musicians). Within theatre in the UK and Ireland, similar terms exist and, while larger institutions *may* be able to honour some part of contracts, the more widespread experience is the sudden disappearance of current livelihoods as well as future work and income plans. Additionally, for many performing artists who self-produce through small independent unstaffed companies, there are loan liabilities pending taken against predicted bookings and future contracts to pay for necessary advance costs like PR, equipment hire, and so on. There are too the lost opportunities that for many will be career-changing: a sellout show, a leading role, a breakthrough album, a concert tour that may never be recovered.

Most performing artists are portfolio workers. The introduction of social distancing measures shut down large then small gatherings, public venues then small scale bars, cafés and restaurants. As a result, the multiple income streams on which performing artists rely have all disappeared. This includes performance occasions (concerts, theatre productions, advertising voiceovers and soundtracks, private bookings such as weddings and parties, film and television work, etc) and parallel work (waitressing, casual admin). In a more complex turn, parallel creative careers that many combine with their work as performing artists (freelance producing, sound engineering, technical and roadie work, private tuition as well as participatory arts work) have also disappeared. As Greek singer Lina tells us:
Myrcini, a Greek violinist and teacher, had just co-founded a small local music school as a way to balance the uncertainty of performance gigs. After having to suspend tuition due to the closures, she says she is unsure whether many of the recently recruited students will bother to re-enrol.

This portfolio nature of performing artists' work falls between or outside the provisions announced by governments in the UK, Ireland and Greece. Their work blends payroll and fee-based work, running often non-profit companies without taking salary or having employees, and in some instances, their activities might even fall under the radar of declared labour. Their payroll contracts are often too short or casualised to be eligible for the 80% or 70% wage subsidy schemes (in UK and Ireland (https://www.gov.ie/en/service/578596-covid-19-wage-subsidy/) respectively). Self-employment subsidy schemes also see significant variation between countries: up to €350 per week in Ireland; between £76 – 96 per week or up to 80% of net self-employed profits paid in arrears in UK.

In Greece, freelancers and casual employees who have been affected by the outbreak can claim a one-off, 'special purpose' €800 allowance, but this is only available to those who can demonstrate regular income until right before the outbreak. For most artists, these represent a drop from regular but low income to living below the poverty line. Most provisions are for up to 12 weeks but we know that these livelihoods and the venues/sites where they happen will not be restored possibly until the end of 2020. With seasonal fluctuations considered (festivals, touring circuits, film/TV, advance production time as examples), it is likely that for many the prospect of paid work will not reappear until 2021. As one UK theatremaker says:

"For the first time in my life, I don't know what to do. I feel I'm losing my creative spark and I fear for the industry I've been in for 22 years of my 39 years. I'm seriously thinking it's not worth it anymore."

The condition of artists in this pandemic demonstrates an ongoing problem with performance work not being seen as 'real' work. In many instances, detail of how employment subsidy and dedicated arts schemes will operate for self-employed artists has not come fast enough making them rush to what few privately run emergency funds exist (for example, NI's crowd-sourced Bread & Butter Fund (https://www.gofundme.com/f/emergency-fund-for-artists-affected-by-covid-9?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=p_lico%2Bupdate&fbclid=IwAR0K1l3du9dh392TcrCRkGoBGZ56459UE3tI9yJ-K3WL1pgZG8WPRq(RfsGg) giving no-strings grants of £200 had to close within 30 minutes after receiving nearly 200 applications).

Despite campaigns for fair pay (https://www.usmusiciansunion.org.uk/Home/Campaign/Fair-Pay-for-Musicians) and conditions (https://www.equity.org.uk/getting-involved/campaigns/professionally-made-professionally-paid/) and an emergency response by some public arts bodies (Wales (https://arts.wales/urgent-response-fund-for-individuals) and Scotland (https://www.creativescotland.com/funding/funding-programmes/bridging-bursary)), the overall response is inconsistent and uneven (and in the case of Northern Ireland (http://arts council-ni.org/news/coronavirus-covid-19-advice), as yet unannounced). We are troubled that many state and international agencies continue in this crisis to ask artists to work for free (https://www.talenthouse.com/i/united-nations-global-call-out-to-creatives-help-stop-the-spread-of-covid-19?fbclid=IwAR2Hjdz5_2pPXGusVmFZifraLNau_BfEFpHz_Wxyp847smjPU3dp4xppfw), have restricted their support to those who have previously been supported by public funding (https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/covid19), have directed the calls for paying artists to funded organisations, or have made support conditional on continued productivity (https://www.cultureireland.ie/news/article/culture-ireland-and-facebook-ireland-announces-details-of-ireland-performs).

There is little regard for the challenge of being creative in new or unfamiliar platforms while attending to the stress, sudden adjustments, and lack of facilities that face artists in their everyday lives or the wider unfunded artistic ecology. Anecdotally, we hear that strides in improving inequalities within performing arts are already rolling back with emergency funds failing to consider the additional pressures of disabled artists, artists from working class and diverse communities, and artists who are also carers. Agencies and large institutions are already suspending existing individual artists' support (https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/DYCP), diversity initiatives and other access schemes.

Just weeks after Arts Council Ireland launched the #PayingtheArtist campaign (http://www.artscouncil.ie/about/Paying-The-Artist/), Ireland’s Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan, announced a package of support (https://www.thejournal.ie/dept-of-culture-scheme-artists-coronavirus-5065971-Apr2020/) which was immediately rejected by national arts
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The performing arts are experiencing significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with freelancers particularly impacted by bureaucratically complex compensation schemes with gaps that freelance performing artists fall through. The UK is seeing an increase in the support of Universal Basic Income (UBI), with Spain announcing its implementation during a pandemic. Whereas a mere few weeks ago UBI was considered a fringe idea, Spain has already announced a plan to take effect soon, and the UK is seeing increasing support for such a plan to take effect soon, and the UK is seeing increasing support for a post-COVID-19 era.

We believe there are urgent and immediate actions required as well as long term considerations in the recovery of the performing arts in a post-COVID-19 era. While frequently criticized by both financiers and anti-capitalists during a pandemic, Universal Basic Income (UBI) has demonstrated that those working in the creative industries are 36% more likely to suffer from poor mental health. Northern Irish researchers have demonstrated that those working in the creative industries are 36% more likely to suffer from poor mental health.

We recommend:

- Performing artists are engaged in their work as emotional labour (meaning that they and their work, personal and professional, are indivisible). There will be significant consequences of putting an already vulnerable group into further stress and poverty while at the same time signalling that their work is of little or less value than that of other workers, not only for the future of our arts and cultural lives but for these individual lives.

Northern Irish researchers have demonstrated that those working in the creative industries are 36% more likely to suffer from poor mental health. We see other research in the UK and Australia that mirror major concerns of poor mental health, linked to precarity, antisocial working hours and practices, and perceived lack of value to their work. Research further shows that performing artists are engaged in their work as emotional labour (meaning that they and their work, personal and professional, are indivisible). There will be significant consequences of putting an already vulnerable group into further stress and poverty while at the same time signalling that their work is of little or less value than that of other workers, not only for the future of our arts and cultural lives but for these individual lives.

What do we recommend?

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In the longer term, the nature of state support, social welfare and tax systems should adapt to a new normal of portfolio working. This effort should seriously take into account the particularities of insecure creative labour (https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/652/) that is becoming widespread in other sectors of work, and respond to it with a robust welfare reform (https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/fixing-safety-net-next-steps-economic-response-coronavirus?fbclid=IwAR1RekZ-vREJczzK07gCNhkrB9h9nykA7fMX-fqJpJRvZj2OpWBxawOe5A). Although we recognise it as directed more particularly to institutional recovery than individual support, a recent plea to governments (https://www.ietch.org/en/rescue-the-arts-plea-to-national-governments) by IETM also makes clear that culture and the arts need to be integrated ‘in economic and social regeneration and future-transformation strategies’, as a recognition not only of their role in alleviating the negative effects of social distancing at the time of COVID-19, but also their contribution to public wellbeing more generally.

Particularly in relation to performing artists, systems of arts support during the COVID-19 crisis need to urgently detach from any sense of ‘productivity’ and, in the long term, review the fragility of the performing arts ecology and the individuals working in it, both within and beyond public funding. Conversations of ‘mothballing’ and ‘cocooning’ other industries to protect them for post-covid regeneration are peculiarly absent in discussions of performing artists and the wide ranging network of funded and unfunded venues and organisations where they work. We see the urgency to automatically switch to online production as ill-timed, ill-fitting, and risking artists’ continued self-exploitation. The insect analogy may be stretched, but we believe there will be no great display of colour post ‘cocoon’, unless we protect and conserve the creative energy of these workers in a meaningful way for what we expect will be a long time. Because of this, we encourage a more considered approach to sustainable support and re-emergence.

Finally, we believe this is a moment in which the steps we take now could or should support an advance into change rather than restoration of the previous. As we emerge, we must resist rolling the clock back on change, especially in relation to diversity and inequality as well as dangerous insecurities of livelihood. We see voices emerging that mirror this suggested rethink or revolution (Yvonne Murphy (https://t.co/5ftoS3q8mE?amp=1), Francois Matarasso (https://parliamentofdreams.com/2020/04/05/what-are-we-saving-and-why/)) but to rethink how performing artists’ future can be reimagined, we know the policy and industry response must go beyond existing public arts and cultural funding, policy and funded institutions. We often hear it said that if you were to start again, you wouldn’t start from here. Maybe, we suggest this is the moment where we could start again.


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There are no new events scheduled at present due to the pandemic.

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