

# The Memo: Episode 15

How long can culture survive lockdown measures?

April 18, 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The landline rings and my father goes to get it. The woman on the other end first asks to verify the number. He's about to hang up when she explains: she's a violinist at the opera house of Lorraine and she's calling to play him a song. My mother joins him, they put her on loudspeaker and the concert begins.

"It was extremely moving to stand there in our living room and listen to her play, just for us, from her own living room," my mother told me later on the phone.

For months now, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced theaters and concert halls to close. With all its shows cancelled, the national Opera of Lorraine has started to organize volunteers. An online form is all it takes to schedule a phone concert for oneself or a loved-one. For my music-loving parents, who hadn't left their home in several weeks, the call came as a delightful surprise.

And yet, it left my mother skeptical: "It was a beautiful moment," she told me, "but it was so strange to listen to her on...a phone."

In this time of social distancing, will music, theater, cinema and the other arts reach us only through our screens? Can culture really continue confined online?

[Jingle]

[Electric music]

- **Chloe :**

Hi Joe! Joe? There's this weird noise...is that coming from you, or from me?

- **Joe :**

Yeah, sorry, I was just working on something. [Music stops] Hi Chloe, and hello everyone! Welcome to this episode of The Memo. For the past few weeks, we've been covering the intersection of digital news, economy, and...lockdown restrictions. We first looked at the labor market, and whether all jobs could be digitized. Then we turned to business online sales platforms. Today we're going to take a look at the culture sector. Chloe, two months in and it's clear: the culture sector has been heavily impacted.

- **Chloe :**

Yes, and the reasons can be summed up in just a few words: social distancing and lockdown. To limit contamination, large gatherings have been widely prohibited. In France, and throughout the world. Broadway, for example, the iconic performing arts avenue in New York, isn't slated to reopen until at least September. And the recent resurgence of the virus in South Korea, linked to a cluster around nightclubs, only confirms that these closures are necessary.

- **Joe :**

So that's why one festival after another is being postponed, or simply cancelled?

- **Chloe :**

And it's not just the festivals. Affected are all sorts of live shows (the theater, concerts, operas, stand-ups) but also movie theaters and museums...basically, any spaces usually open to the public. And a return to normal seems unlikely, at least any time soon. That's what I read in an excellent feature in The Atlantic, which looked at when theaters might reopen. For a number of producers, opening too soon could be a disaster if there's a second wave of lockdown measures. They'd again have to foot the bill on shows unable to run...and most of all, audiences would be even less likely to buy tickets again, pushing any hope of a return to normal even further away.

- **Joe :**

Which means... it's like everything has been...put on hold... But we haven't stopped enjoying culture. Or even feeling quite passionate about it, like my parents. Listening to a violinist on the phone isn't like going to the opera, but still...

- **Chloe :**

Yes, so many cultural activities are moving online right now. Music is an excellent example: Vox put out an article called "How "quarantine concerts" are keeping live music alive." According to them, music is more important now, in times of isolation, than ever before. This is why artists are finding other ways to perform "live" through platforms like Instagram or Youtube. Audiences and performers are all looking for ways to weather out the crisis together. And these home shows are a perfect way to combine artistic performance with a collective experience that puts everyone at ease.

- **Joe :**

I was watching one of these concerts, when it struck me that it's almost as though all of these musicians were on the same stage. The bands who usually perform in an arena of ten thousand people; the philharmonic orchestra; the soloists, etc.

- **Chloe :**

Yes, you're absolutely right. Culture with a capital C has become an intimate experience. But it hasn't become individualistic. Many of these initiatives ran under the hashtag TogetherAtHome. In France, no less than 3,600 amateur singers were brought together alongside Jane Birkin in a lockdown version of La Javanaise, orchestrated by the public radio and the Théâtre du Chatelet.

- **Joe :**

And it's even an opportunity to discover certain exhibits or events... that people may not have necessarily known about otherwise.

- **Chloe :**

That's Isabelle Giordano line of argument too, writing in early April for the French business paper, Les Echos. She's the president of the strategic committee of the Culture Pass, a scheme run by the

Ministry of Culture aimed at bringing culture to young audiences. And she writes: "Digital cultural events have never been so numerous [...] It is now possible to have access to the biggest exhibits" or to attend a prestigious concert from home. Though she admits that the experience cannot replace a "physical visit to a museum or actually going to the movies", she stresses that everyone now knows that digital culture is possible. It has demonstrated its ability to reach a wide audience, especially young people.

- **Joe :**

So is this crisis a great opportunity for the world of culture to reinvent itself online?

- **Chloe :**

Jean-Laurent Cassely even goes further than that in the French weekly, L'Express. For artists, creatives and intellectuals, the digital transition is a must: the alternative being irrelevance. But some performances just aren't made to be digital.

- **Joe :**

They're not all equal when facing the crisis, right?

- **Chloe :**

Right. The Atlantic came to the same conclusion: broadcasting plays online may be a nice initiative, but all too often, according to the article, these recordings simply look like bad television.

- **Joe :**

Not to mention the collective aspect of the experience...a concert, a comedy show, a play...these are moments we like to share with others.

- **Chloe :**

That's what an article in Wired also notes. Many streaming platforms decided to release pop culture classics like the latest Star Wars film earlier than planned, much to the delight of isolated fans who now have plenty of time to binge-watch. But how to make this a shared experience? Many are turning to a collective online experience, like watching gamers play on Twitch or sharing videos on Tik Tok...

- **Joe :**

And then there's the thorny question of income...

- **Chloe :**

This is the major challenge of the current crisis. The sharing of revenues from what is broadcast online. Let's take the example of music, which in itself is quite straight-forward. I read about it in the German paper Die Zeit. The author reacts ironically to Spotify's move to add a donation button on its platform next to performers' names. To sum up their point: if revenues were shared more fairly, the button would not be necessary.

- **Joe :**

Still, there will always be people eager to make music.

- **Chloe :**

Yes, but in the age of streaming, the business model has changed. Bands used to go on tour to sell albums, but with new streaming practices, the finances have been reversed. Artists make albums to justify live tours, which is where most of their income actually comes from. So you can see how the current health crisis is a real threat for a sector already undergoing significant shifts.

- **Joe :**

And I suppose this doesn't just impact the artists themselves...

- **Chloe :**

No, it impacts an entire segment of the economy. The Guardian ran a story on how the live music and festival industry is on the verge of collapse. This is not just for music, but other sectors as well. Thierry Frémaux, artistic director of this year's cancelled Cannes Film Festival, puts it well: "We protected the banks in 2008," he said, "so let's protect cinemas, theatres and bookshops in 2020. Personally, to live, I need my bank. But I also need the cinema."

- **Joe :**

Thank you Chloe, and thank you to all our listeners. By the way, Chloe, do you want to listen to what I've been working on? [Mechanical noises]

- **Chloe :**

Thanks but...why don't you share once it's finished?

- **Germain :**

Another time then. As always, if you liked this episode, don't hesitate to share it on social media. You can find links to all the articles we mentioned below the description. See you soon for a new episode of the Memo!

### **Sources :**

[On joue chez vous !](#) (Opéra national de Lorraine)

[À New York, les théâtres de Broadway resteront fermés jusqu'à début septembre au moins](#) (Le Figaro)

[New South Korea coronavirus cluster linked to reopened nightclubs delays reopening of schools](#) (CBS News)

[When Will We Want to Be in a Room Full of Strangers Again?](#) (The Atlantic)

[How "quarantine concerts" are keeping live music alive as venues remain closed](#) (Vox)

["La javanaise" : 3 600 vidéos d'amateurs envoyées pour un concert confiné avec Jane Birkin sur France Musique](#) (France Info)

[La culture au temps du confinement](#) (Les Echos)

[Jean-Laurent Cassely : Intellos, artistes, créatifs... la transition numérique ou la mort ?](#) (L'Express)

[As Pandemic Strikes, Pop Culture Migrates to Streaming Sites](#) (Wired)

[Haste mal nen Cent für die armen Künstler?](#) (Die Zeit)

[UK live music and festival sector at risk of collapse due to coronavirus](#) (The Guardian)

[Cannes abandons 'physical' festival for 2020 but will select films for screening elsewhere](#) (The Guardian)