

Zeitschrift: Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft = Annales suisses de musicologie = Annuario Svizzero di musicologia
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Musikforschende Gesellschaft
Band: 38 (2018-2021)

Artikel: Music (as) labour: crises and solidarities among Greek musicians in the pandemic
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1089877>

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Music (as) Labour: Crises and Solidarities among Greek Musicians in the Pandemic

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DOI: [10.36950/sjm.38.1](https://doi.org/10.36950/sjm.38.1)

Keywords: Greece, pandemic, music-making, precarity, professionalism

Abstract: *The study of music (as) labour has often been hindered in musicology by divisions between professional and amateur musicians as well as conflicting conceptualizations of work or pleasure. In contrast, with this article I propose that we regard all music making activity as labour. Through theorizations of affective, emotional, aesthetic and phatic labour, I highlight the different elements of work manifesting within music conduct. Then, through the case study of musicians in Greece, the article examines how music work is impacted by cumulative crises: Firstly the economic crisis of the previous decade and consequently the global pandemic. In this process, I trace an awakening of collectivism that puts forward the demand for the recognition of music (and other performing arts) as work, and particularly as a labour of love.*

Introduction: Music as Work

Musicians are workers. A seemingly innocuous statement, arguably even a truism, yet the examination of music performers as labourers is not commonplace in academic literature.² In musicological writings, the question of music (as) labour is very often accompanied by caveats and uttered with reservations. We find ourselves trying to argue that musicians are also workers, or list exceptions of performers who do not fit the descriptor in ways that we would not do for other professions, even within the creative industries.³ The titan of popular music studies Simon Frith, for example, in a brief article reflecting on the conference *Working in Music*⁴ writes that “some musicians are considered to be workers, others are not”.⁵ Frith further qualifies this statement by pointing out that “the idea of ‘musician as worker’ has continually been opposed by the idea of ‘musician as creative artist’, an auteur who may be happy to benefit from union membership but does not want to be thought of as ‘a worker’”.⁶ This tension, Frith argues, is due to a “belief that music – making music – is in itself, fun, a pleasurable activity that shouldn’t be thought of as work”, an idea which “is embedded in our culture”.⁷ Hence, the value of music, Frith concludes, “is precisely as non-work. Musicians may, then, be workers, but they shouldn’t be!”.⁸

To be sure, Frith is not alone in either music academia or the industry in expressing this ambivalence. As my own fifteen-year-long research among music labourers in Greece has cautioned me, performing

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2 There are, of course, notable exceptions to this. These include early work by Howard Becker (1951), Robert Stebbins (1969), John Baily (1988) and Richard Faulkner (1985), as well as more recent research on performance labour in ethnomusicology, popular music studies, and culture industries studies including Cottrell (2004), Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), Morcom (2013), Cloonan (2014), Hofman (2015), Williamson and Cloonan (2016), Scharff (2018), Tarassi (2018), Llano (2018) and others.

3 For studies of diverse types of work in the culture industries, indicating the difference in discourses but also establishing the centrality of labour as an analytical lens, see Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) and McRobbie (2016).

4 The conference was organised in Glasgow in January 2016, by Martin Cloonan and John Williamson. Information available here: <https://wim.hypotheses.org/conference/glasgow-2016> [15.06.2022].

5 FRITH 2017: 111.

6 FRITH 2017: 115.

7 FRITH 2017: 115.

8 FRITH 2017: 115.

musicians always iterate exclusions in who qualifies as a worker⁹ and they draw boundaries between activities that they regard as ‘work’ versus what they consider to be ‘play’.¹⁰ However, after more than a decade of cumulative crises of capitalism that have seen increased precarity in all sectors of work but especially in freelance creative professions,¹¹ and the exacerbation of insecurity due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic,¹² here I argue that our analysis of music labour needs to be expansive and unreserved.

In a recent editorial for the *Political and Legal Anthropology Review (PoLAR)*, Jessica R. Greenberg and Jessica Winegar write that: “The exceptional time of the pandemic revealed in stark form all of the problems of the status quo. We have learned that we do not need or want to ‘return to normal.’ Rather, we join the feminist, anti-racist, class-conscious multitudes who are screaming that the normal is not sustainable.”¹³ Listening to this call for academic honesty and activism, with this article I argue that an emphasis on the labour of music-making is a duty towards struggling musicians in their diverse multitudes, who refuse to return to a perverse, pre-pandemic ‘normal’. In the following sections, I will first outline a broad understanding of labour that includes all musical conduct that we habitually encounter as musicologists, before delving into the case study of Greek musicians during the nation’s economic crisis (2010–2019) and the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021). I will then examine new strategies and solidarities that emerge from these piling crises and suggest ways in which they make the demand for a recognition of creative artists as workers timelier than ever.

Labour and its Forms

A big obstacle in recognizing all music-making as labour comes from the engagement with the concept of ‘professionalism’. Literature in popular music and ethnomusicology has historically been uncomfortable when grappling with the question of who qualifies as a ‘professional musician’.¹⁴ According to Ruth Finnegan, some difficulties in differentiating between professional and amateur musicians, “lie in the ambiguities in the concept of ‘earning one’s living’, others in differing interpretations about what is meant by working in ‘music’, and others again – perhaps the most powerful of all – in the emotive overtones of the term ‘professional’ as used by the participants themselves”.¹⁵ In his research on professional classical musicians in London, Stephen Cottrell has explained that, although the most common criterion of professionalism is “to be paid to play”, it is the context within which one performs that defines whether or not this is “real professional work”.¹⁶ Professional musicians in Greece engage with these debates in very similar ways, whereby recognition of ‘professional’ status entails the acquisition of a wide range of competencies and relies on their acknowledgment by the wider community. These competencies combine and traverse different factors including musical skill, social strategies, and the contentious idea of ‘success’.¹⁷

However, what I want to argue here is that the concept of music labour need not be conflated with the status of ‘professionalism’. In other words, whether or not musicians recognize themselves (or are credited by others) as ‘professionals’ is not a prerequisite for an understanding of what they do as ‘labour’. As social scientists, we have plenty of theoretical frameworks to conceptualize labour in its different manifestations, allowing us to think of music as *work* regardless of its ‘quality’, its lucrateness, or its frequency for each individual musician. Here I want to briefly outline some such frameworks that

9 TSIOLAKIS 2020: 54–77.

10 TSIOLAKIS 2011, 2013.

11 LOREY 2011; McROBBIE 2011.

12 BASTANI et al. 2021; COMUNIAN and ENGLAND 2020; FITZGIBBON and TSIOLAKIS forthcoming.

13 GREENBERG and WINEGAR 2021.

14 See BECKER 1951; MERRIAM 1964: 123–144; FINNEGAN 1989: 12–18.

15 FINNEGAN 1989: 13.

16 COTTRELL 2004: 9.

17 TSIOLAKIS 2020: 27–53.

can be helpful in delineating how music becomes experienced as work: affective, emotional, aesthetic, and phatic labour.

Affective labour, especially in its conceptualization by Michael Hardt, designates work that is performed to produce affect in its recipients. Hardt understands this work as a subset of wider types of ‘immaterial labour’,¹⁸ that is specifically premised upon human contact and interaction.¹⁹ This labour, Hardt further explains, “is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness or community”.²⁰ Hardt indeed identifies the culture industries as a key locus of such labour, but also expands to other domains such as care work, the food services and finance industries.²¹ While musicians undoubtedly perform affective labour,²² they also subject themselves to ‘emotional labour’, defined by Arlie Hochschild as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display”,²³ insofar as they manipulate their own emotions and their outward performance as part of their work.²⁴ In this process, musicians (much like actors) engage in what Hochschild calls “deep acting”,²⁵ where “one’s face and one’s feelings take on the properties of a resource”.²⁶ Musical performance then operates within this interface between emotional and affective labour: musicians strive to experience emotions and induce affect, and this is *work*, even when it is not recognized or compensated as such.²⁷

Expanding on Hochschild’s concept of emotional labour, Anne Witz et al. introduce the idea of ‘aesthetic labour’, which acknowledges the embodied aspect of service and culture work.²⁸ As the authors emphasize, aesthetic labour relies on the “mobilization, development and commodification of embodied ‘dispositions’”,²⁹ employing “organizational prescriptions of embodied appearance, demeanor and comportment”.³⁰ Musicians engage in this form of labour by continuously curating themselves, both in terms of their appearance (their bodies, their hairstyles, their clothes) and their embodied performative vocabulary, from their movement to their voice and instrumental techniques.³¹ This acquisition and maintenance of an “embodied cultural capital”³² is part and parcel of the labour of making music, even outside of the milieux of recognized ‘professional’ musicians. Finally, in the pursuit of performance opportunities and visibility, musicians construct communicative networks with other performers, entrepreneurs, and fans, what Shannon Garland calls “phatic labour”.³³ As Garland illustrates in a case study of indie music in Chile, phatic labour includes “the cultivation of social networks for themselves as practices of sociality, but which simultaneously serve as the grounds upon which resources can be moved and transferred”.³⁴ In that sense, even the very act of socializing within the music world can be

18 See LAZZARATO 1996.

19 HARDT 1999: 95.

20 HARDT 1999: 96.

21 HARDT 1999: 95–96. For an in-depth discussion of affective and emotional labour in the culture industries, see HESMONDHALGH and BAKER 2011: 159–180. For some illustrative accounts of affective labour in other contexts, see Gabriele KOCH’s (2016) study of the Tokyo sex industry and Zeynep KORKMAN’s (2015) research on coffee divination in Turkey.

22 See HOFMAN 2015.

23 HOCHSCHILD 1983: 7.

24 For reviews of the contribution of HOCHSCHILD’s theory of emotional labour in social science research in the following two decades, see STEINBERG and FIGART 1999 and WHARTON 2009.

25 HOCHSCHILD 1983: 38–55.

26 HOCHSCHILD 1983: 55.

27 See HESMONDHALGH and BAKER 2011: 159–163.

28 WITZ et al. 2003. I am grateful to my PhD students Federica Banfi and Hannah Gibson for introducing me to this concept, which they have fruitfully applied to the work of transnational tango dancers (BANFI 2021) and Irish Country musicians (GIBSON 2021).

29 WITZ et al. 2003: 37.

30 WITZ et al. 2003: 38.

31 A similar idea is explored in Elizabeth WISSINGER’s (2015) work on ‘glamour labour’ among fashion models.

32 BOURDIEU 1986: 47.

33 GARLAND 2019; drawing on ELYACHAR 2010.

34 GARLAND 2019: 29.

conceptualized as work, which, again, is by no way limited to musicians who use performance as their main source of income.

As I hope the above makes clear, musical activity in all its manifestations, from experiencing and externalizing emotion to generating affects and from curating embodied dispositions to forging social networks, whatever else it might be, is always labour. Additionally and significantly, music is precarious labour. The theme of precarity/precarization in neoliberal labour management is well-documented in the social sciences, especially from the global economic recession of 2008 onwards.³⁵ Waves of economic instability and the imposition of austerity measures, especially in Europe, mean that labour insecurity has become a normative and permanent tool of managing workforce, a phenomenon that Isabell Lorey calls “governmental precarization”.³⁶ Precarious labour, then, shapes a particular type of worker and human being, a precariat. As Noelle Molé has powerfully articulated drawing on research among precarious labourers in the Italian service industry, “[a]vowing oneself as a precariat signals a classed political subjectivity: a worker at the mercy of risk, marginality, anxiety, even paranoia.”³⁷ Gretchen Purser, researching African-American workforce in the inner-cities of Oakland and Baltimore, has also shown that the liminal state of waiting in-between states of employment, is additionally dispossessing and debilitating.³⁸ She writes:

This period of chronic and obligatory unpaid waiting [...] serves as an instrument of inspection, an instrument of immobilization, and an instrument of intensified investment. I argue that recognizing these functions enables us to better understand not only the distinct operations of the day labour business, but the ways in which labour is subjugated, dependency is cultivated, and precarious and degraded conditions of employment are normalized for those at the bottom of the labour market.³⁹

Some of these conditions are all too familiar to precarious, freelance musicians,⁴⁰ and not by coincidence. Angela McRobbie argues that this type of insecurity has been long tried in the culture industries, allowing those workers

to act as guinea pigs for testing out the new world of work without the full raft of social security entitlements and welfare provision that have been associated with the post-Second World War period. [...] The creative workforce might be relatively small, but it is being trained up to pave the way for a new post-welfare era.⁴¹

Musicians, then, are called to navigate the turbulent waters of insecure employment, while engaging in demanding types of affective, emotional, aesthetic and phatic labour. In this effort, they often “reproduce neoliberalism”,⁴² or even “choose poverty”⁴³ in order to “negotiate the more pathological effects, both political and economic, of post-industrialization and the concomitant onset of risk and uncertainty”.⁴⁴

Having articulated the main components and predicaments of music labour, I will now focus on the ethnographic case study of Greek musicians in the past decade. Reflecting on particular circumstances of piling crises, this next section will show how the canonical conditions of working in music become exacerbated by generalized national crisis and the experience of the recent pandemic.

³⁵ See STANDING 2011; LOREY 2015, 2019.

³⁶ LOREY 2019.

³⁷ MOLÉ 2010: 39.

³⁸ PURSER 2012.

³⁹ PURSER 2012: 30–31.

⁴⁰ See SCHARFF, 2018: 140–169; GROSS and MUSGRAVE 2020: 41–62.

⁴¹ McROBBIE 2016: 34–35.

⁴² HAENFLER 2018: 188–189.

⁴³ THREADGOLD 2018.

⁴⁴ BENNETT 2018: 146.

Music and Crisis in Greece: From Economic Recession to the Pandemic

"Crisis! Crisis! Everyone going crazy about it, it's all you hear. But were musicians ever not in crisis? Welcome to our world, you 'normal' people! See how you like it."⁴⁵ Those were the words of Stefanos, a keyboardist in his late thirties, when, in the Autumn of 2016, I dared ask about the impact of 'The Greek Crisis' on freelance musicians. His indignation was illustrative of a prevailing attitude among Greek musicians after 2010: The Crisis was merely an exacerbation of precarity with which they had been dealing their whole lives. At the same time, musicians also drew temporal lines, narrativizing a 'before' and 'after' of the financial meltdown and its role in the intensity of their precarity. As Efi, a singer in her early forties reminisced in 2016:

I entered the industry as a singer just a few years before the crisis, so I saw the end of the 'good days', when you would still get some 'grand' opportunities. You know, where they would invite you to play with good technical support, background organisation and planning, full audiences, decent pay and so on. Now all that is over. Anything you do is only down to exhausting personal effort, and it rarely ends up being worth it.

The Greek Crisis has been painstakingly studied in social sciences, from economics⁴⁶ to political philosophy⁴⁷ and anthropology.⁴⁸ In its role as a "trope"⁴⁹ but also as a "state of emergency",⁵⁰ which was strategically declared by the Greek Government in its pursuit of a neoliberal agenda of economic austerity, The Greek Crisis has significantly restructured society, political alliances, and even artistic practice.⁵¹ In its most devastating manifestation, The Greek Crisis served as a trigger for harsh austerity policies that intensified precarity and even created a new class of citizens at risk, what Neni Panourgia calls "neo-poor".⁵² However, rather than an unforeseen consequence of 'The Crisis', this was a political project. As Athena Athanasiou argues, "[n]eoliberal governments use the ever-present emergency of crisis, with all its accompanying affective apparatuses of fear and insecurity, in order to legitimize the necessity to take action in the direction of managing uncertainty and establishing a new and secure normality. Crisis necessitates the realism of constant management – both pre-emptive and reparative."⁵³

These circumstances of austerity and socioeconomic devastation brought severe consequences onto the already precarious class of freelance musicians.⁵⁴ Even though musicians recognized that The Crisis affected them in unequal ways depending on the nature of their core activities, their relative success within the music business and their skills and ability to diversify, the narratives of the impact that The Crisis has had on them collectively appeared quite uniform:

I first sensed the crisis in 2010 when the payments started diminishing. In the first few years, they were only reducing the salaries of session musicians so that the pop stars would keep their earnings, but now that the whole industry has gone to shit, everyone is struggling and panicking. [...] Until 2009, busy session musicians like myself would make more than 3000 Euros per month and now we stress over making 500 or 1000. This year I started rehearsals in three different clubs that never actually opened for the public, so that was completely wasted time.⁵⁵

Greek musicians battled these circumstances as a relatively 'trained precariat', who had always been striving for control in an environment that was not of their own making. Take for example the testimony of Sissy, a composer and instrumentalist in her early 30s, who after a few years of successful employment

45 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from musicians in Greece were provided in private ethnographic interviews, and translated from Greek to English by the author. All names in this article are used with explicit permission by the interviewees.

46 VAROUFAKIS 2013; LAPAVITSAS 2019.

47 DOUZINAS 2013.

48 DALAKOGLU et al. 2018; KNIGHT 2012, 2013; PANOURGIA 2018.

49 KNIGHT 2013.

50 ATHANASIOU 2018.

51 TZIOVAS 2017; VAVVA 2020; BASEA 2016.

52 PANOURGIA 2018.

53 ATHANASIOU 2018: 15.

54 TSIOLAKIS 2020: 112–137.

55 Vaios, bassist, interviewed in 2016.

in the music business, found herself in the midst of The Crisis having to work as an assistant to her father, a painter: “I was there holding a paintbrush and found myself wondering: ‘wait a minute, who am I?’ [...] I don’t think it’s even because of the crisis. It was always difficult for musicians. We have chosen a path that we knew from the start that we will never be secure.”

Yet, the severity of the crisis resulted in the construction of new perceptions of the self, what I have called ‘crisis subjectivities’.⁵⁶ Even though they did not come as a complete breach with previous states of insecurity, crisis-subjectivities were new, insofar as they pushed musicians to an almost ontological reflection (“Who am I?”) out of which emerged a person eager to reconfigure their actions, strategies, and ultimately their own self-conception. This phenomenon, as Isabell Lorey has shown, is a direct result of the monetization of affective and emotional labour within conditions of precarity, whereby we can detect “a tendency for the whole person to become labour power, body and intellectual capabilities included.”⁵⁷ For musicians, this condition brought about a whole questioning of their current selves, as pianist Stathis evocatively explained in an interview in 2016: “I had to take some time to recall why I started playing music in the first place, and that required some real time off and introspection. I eventually remembered that it was because of the creativity and the experimentation, not simply to get the job done.” A similar testimony of radical personal reconfiguration was offered by Themis, a jazz violinist:

Last summer I went to Crete and played as a busker with a friend for three months. [...] I would never have thought of doing that in the 2000s; it would be pretty embarrassing. [...] I met a guitarist from Paris there, he invited me over this Spring; he has a comfortable couch he said [laughing]. I’m thinking about it!

The transformation of subjectivity is very evident here. In the wake of The Crisis, Themis turned from a person who would have found busking to be “pretty embarrassing”, to someone who not only engaged in it as a necessity to make ends meet, but even valued it as a networking opportunity for the future.⁵⁸ What is additionally significant for these subjectivities is that they were experienced in isolation, and internalized as moments of personal rupture, rather than being channelled into some kind of collective action. This condition changed radically with the emergence of the pandemic crisis.

In the wake of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic, and as different parts of the world started ‘locking down’ in March 2020, it was immediately apparent that the socioeconomic repercussions of this new crisis would be profound and long-lasting.⁵⁹ Within these circumstances, performing workers were a key demographic that suffered disproportionate effects on their livelihoods and even their ability to sustain their careers.⁶⁰ As Mark Banks already remarked in April 2020: “In the midst of pandemic, we are turning to culture [...] Yet, over a few short weeks, most of the producers of this vitality – the many hundreds of thousands of arts, culture and media workers – have seen their current livelihoods disappear, and their professional futures thrown into jeopardy.”⁶¹ This is because “[a]s the pandemic hit Europe and venues started to cancel events or close, we know that not only did musicians [...] lose immediate work but they had little contractual protection for future cancellations.”⁶² Arguably, this is a phenomenon that musicians (and other freelance workers) had to face globally and across genres with small variations.⁶³ However, as I have shown, the pandemic crisis found Greek musicians already severely precarized and financially devastated after a decade-long recession and austerity.

⁵⁶ TSIOLAKIS 2020: 123–133.

⁵⁷ LOREY 2019: 185.

⁵⁸ I explore these and many other personal testimonies in greater detail in my monograph (TSIOLAKIS 2020). There, I document the emergence of a whole narrative style, what I call ‘precarity stories’, that dramatize the battles of musicians with The Crisis in personified encounters of conflict with colleagues, employers, and the State (TSIOLAKIS 2020: 126–133).

⁵⁹ GOPINATH 2020.

⁶⁰ TSIOLAKIS and FITZGIBBON 2020; COMUNIAN and ENGLAND 2020; Lashua et al. 2020.

⁶¹ BANKS 2020.

⁶² TSIOLAKIS and FITZGIBBON 2020.

⁶³ BOTSTEIN 2020; PARSONS 2020.

My interviews with musicians in the Summer of 2020 immediately painted a grim picture: “We always knew that there is insecurity and that we could even be deceived and betrayed by our employers. But this has now reached its absolute peak”, recounted Mihalīs, a musician and actor in his late twenties. As an additional hit, the pandemic lockdown also created obstacles for private tuition, an activity to which many musicians had resorted as a way to shield themselves from the direst consequences of precarity in the performance circuit.⁶⁴ As Myrcini, a violinist and music teacher who had recently embarked on a new business venture establishing a small music school, confessed: “My performance income has taken a sharp fall, but the worst thing is with the school that was so fresh. We didn’t have many students, and the longer it stays closed we doubt that we’ll be able to keep it afloat. We don’t even know how many of the students are planning to come back when all this is over.”

Even though some emergency benefits were offered by the State, providing temporary relief for those who were in a position to claim them, the majority of freelance performers saw their income fall in real terms to less than half.⁶⁵ What is more, the majority of musicians (at least 70% of them, according to interviews with officers of the Panhellenic Musicians’ Union), did not even qualify for those allowances, due to the unregulated way in which casual music labour operates within the Greek industries.⁶⁶ While many musicians saw the initial lockdown as an opportunity to rest, practice, and re-evaluate some of their priorities, the prolongation of restrictions and continuous uncertainty for the future created an unbearable sense of insecurity: “The worst feeling was at the end of the first lockdown, in June 2020, when I realized that I was looking ahead at a summer with a completely empty calendar. I had no idea how to support myself”, said Nikos, a folk musician who normally relied on the summer season for a busy schedule of performances in the traditional celebrations of the Greek periphery.

In Greece, conditions of economic, social and subsequently public health crisis, have shaped a context of insecure music labour pushed to its limits. The endemic precarity of music work, in its concomitant affective, emotional, aesthetic, and phatic forms, finds an extreme manifestation in the Greek case. However, this pile-up of crises gave rise from the Summer of 2020 and onwards to a new collectivism among musicians and other creative artists. In the epicentre of their solidarity and activism was one demand: the recognition of art as labour. Musicians, they said loudly, are workers.

New Solidarities: Grassroots Movements, Unions, and the Issue of ‘Artistic Labour’

On 24 August 2021, and after eighteen months of complete closure or severe restrictions on live music events in an effort to contain the spread of the pandemic, the Greek Government announced a plan of reopening indoor entertainment venues from the 13 September 2021.⁶⁷ This included health measures such as tight restrictions for the admittance of unvaccinated patrons, as well as a requirement of frequent testing for employees (including performers), paid by those workers to private testing centres. In response to those announcements, the Panhellenic Musicians’ Union (henceforth PMU), promptly called for a nation-wide demonstration by all artists’ unions, to be held on 9 September. This call was quickly disseminated on social media,⁶⁸ including the Facebook group ‘Musicians in Crisis’ (Μουσικοί σε Κρίση), which has become a key online hub for music workers since the beginning of the pandemic.⁶⁹ Significantly, the advertisement of the PMU’s call by the founder of the Facebook group, 60-year-

64 TSIOLAKIS 2020: 143–148.

65 APTALIKO 2021.

66 See FITZGIBBON and TSIOLAKIS forthcoming.

67 The detailed announcement including a legal framework can be found here (in Greek): <https://covid19.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/presentation-nea-metra-1.pdf> [15.06.2022].

68 This includes the PMU’s own Facebook account. The announcement can be seen here: <https://www.facebook.com/pmu.gr/photos/a.2581315708641048/3794552683984005> [15.06.2022].

69 The group is public, and can be accessed here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/mousikoisekrisi> [15.06.2022].

old keyboardist and musical director Vasilis Ginos, was concluded with the phrase: “Our only means of fighting is collective struggle.” (“Δεν έχουμε άλλο μέσο πάλης παρά την συλλογική”)⁷⁰

Founded by a grassroots team of session instrumentalists of the popular nightclub circuit in September 2020, ‘Musicians in Crisis’ has been a very vibrant online social space, where musicians of all employment sectors, genres, and regions have been exchanging views and advice related to the pandemic crisis. In the first year of its operation, the group served as a forum for constant – often contentious – discussion from the ground up, as well as a space for announcements especially with regards to economic benefits for out-of-work musicians and changes in restrictions with regards to live music performance. At the time of writing in August 2021, the group numbers more than 5,800 members, and averages over 100 original posts per month, each receiving tens or even hundreds of responses from users on a daily basis. The group administrators have recently launched a grassroots research project, comprising an online questionnaire and mapping exercise, with the intention to “document the professional profile of musicians that have joined the group, understand their conditions and needs, and accordingly adjust the information and consultation that it offers, as well as our communication with official collective bargaining bodies”. A similar mapping and analysis project, including qualitative and quantitative data from over a thousand participant musicians, was carried out by another grassroots organization at the end of 2020, and has since generated a great deal of attention among both workers and stakeholders.⁷¹

This kind of collective action – from initiating social media forums for labour issues, to joining unions and their demonstrations and organizing self-funded research projects to analyze the sector – would have been very unlikely until the end of 2019, even after a decade of economic crisis. The reason for this radical change was succinctly explained to me by Iakovos, a young actor who has been involved in arts labour activism since the start of the pandemic: “With the first lockdown, overnight, everyone was out of work. No one could pretend to be ‘successful’, or to not care about money. We were all in the same boat.” Hence, the closure of venues that rendered all performers unemployed at once, managed a double strike at two crucial factors that have been preventing collective struggle among musicians (and other artists) amidst the economic crisis: artistic pretence and entrepreneurial individualism.

Let us take those one by one. The notion that concerns over fair economic compensation somehow cheapen or ‘take the fun out of’ musical creativity (which is echoed by Frith as discussed in the Introduction), is often prevalent among critics/academics as well as some musicians. But the fantasy of an artist that operates free of conditions of dependent employment is, as Alan Bradshaw argues, a “Bohemian desire [which] emerges as a particular middle-class preoccupation – a struggle of the holders of cultural capital to assert themselves in spaces in which economic capital is preferred”.⁷² This class-informed ideology, Bradshaw continues,

has little to offer in terms of artistic production but rather is a lifestyle aspiration that has extended into a means of assessing musicianship and detecting cynical and sincere practices. Indeed, musicians often protest that the accusations of sellout are totally unhelpful inasmuch as they undermine the creative capacity of struggling musicians to survive in difficult circumstances [...] At worst, the bohemian demand celebrates the plight of artists and fetishizes their self-destructiveness.⁷³

Granted, musicians might be more likely to fuss over working conditions and payment in contexts where they have less creative control over the music produced,⁷⁴ but this does not mean that labour issues are somehow irrelevant to artistic creativity. In fact, it is often the very pretence of artistic bohemianism

70 The post can be found here (in Greek): <https://www.facebook.com/groups/mousikoisekrisi/permalink/1002028407220915> [15.06.2022].

71 APTALIKO 2021.

72 BRADSHAW 2015.

73 BRADSHAW 2015.

74 TSIOLAKIS 2013.

that is used as a tool for the exploitation of creative artists. In Gerald Raunig's words, "[s]omewhat cynically one could say that Adorno's melancholy over the loss of autonomy has now been perversely realized in the working conditions of the creative industries: the creatives are released into a specific sphere of freedom, of independence and self-government".⁷⁵ In that sense, the reactionary tendency to divorce artistic freedom from fair labour had, even in times of crisis, stood in the way of musicians openly raising grievances about their working conditions. This obstacle gave way in the wake of a pandemic that crammed everyone "in the same boat" (as per Iakovos's words), allowing musicians the space to voice demands without appearing too cynical or 'unartistic'.

The second factor, entrepreneurial individualism, was also prevalent within the crisis-scape of the previous decade. Musicians often appeared reserved in expressing concerns over their livelihoods in fear of being perceived as 'mediocre' or 'unsuccessful'. As singer Alexandra told me in frustration about some of her colleagues during an interview in 2017: "You'd see them on social media and think they're all swimming in money and success. I don't know if they're trying to fool others or themselves, but they're pathetic." This entrepreneurial individualism, which pitted artists against each other in a frantic struggle to secure the few lucrative opportunities in the industry, is again well-documented in critical literature.⁷⁶ As Maurizio Lazzarato articulates: "This idea of the individual as an entrepreneur of her/himself is the culmination of capital as a machine of subjectivation."⁷⁷ The entrepreneurial artist, Lazzarato adds,

brings the subjectivation process to its pinnacle, because in all these activities s/he involves the 'immaterial' and 'cognitive' resources of her/his 'self', while on the other, s/he inclines towards identification, subjectivation and exploitation, given that s/he is both her/his own master and slave, a capitalist and a proletarian, the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement.⁷⁸

The façade of resilience and success as an entrepreneurial strategy also became eclipsed by the eradication of all performance opportunities as lockdown measures were implemented. Musicians had no one to pretend to. They were all stuck at home, out of work, and their screens lit with an outpouring of frustration, accompanied by calls for solidarity.

In these circumstances, collective struggle started to flourish. Musicians (and other performers) started joining their trade unions and new grassroots movements emerged. As Athena, a *kanun* player and elected officer of the PMU told me in a private interview in July 2020, "We used to have general meetings with 50–60 members present, and in the last one we had a crowd of 350". The president of the Association of Musicians in Northern Greece also reported in a public meeting that their subscriptions doubled from 200 to 400 members as an immediate result of the first phase of the pandemic. In all of the testimonies that I have gathered from musicians who are active in the trade unions, the link between sudden economic desperation in the wake of the closure of performance venues and engagement in collective bodies was very explicit. As Athena recalled: "We had colleagues calling us and asking for help because they had no money to pay for electricity or feed their families." The PMU was quick in taking on such 'bread and butter' issues, by immediately pressuring the government to include musicians in unemployment benefits, expand the special Covid-19 support schemes to include more freelancers, and freeze some of their accumulating taxation and other state expenses during the health-related measures that prevented them from working. The PMU also seized the moment to raise awareness and build a movement among musicians, and as a result their membership soared. Anastasis, a performing musician and more recent recruit of the union told me in a private interview:

⁷⁵ RAUNIG 2011: 199.

⁷⁶ TARASSI 2018; LOREY 2011; SCHARFF 2018: 113–139.

⁷⁷ LAZZARATO 2011: 47.

⁷⁸ LAZZARATO 2011: 48.

In 2020 I had the most difficult summer since I became a musician and I was ready to quit. But through the PMU I understood that this was not my personal fault and that it had to do with the way that labour rights have been trashed in the past few years. The PMU detected the issues immediately, its officers confronted the political leaders head on, and its role was solidified in the demonstrations from the get go.

Also notable was a new grassroots movement powered by social media under the motto 'Support Art Workers', which emerged as a point of convergence and solidarity for tens of thousands of creative artists including musicians, actors, dancers, visual artists and technicians. As Valeria, an actor/musician and founding member of 'Support Art Workers' told me in an interview: "If it wasn't for the pandemic, there would never have been such comradeship." Mina, a dancer also active in the collective, agreed:

The artworld is not used to collective processes. There was no explicit consciousness of the structures within which we work. Art had been disconnected from issues of labour and livelihood so everyone was disengaged when it came to struggling for collective rights and benefits. The pandemic seems to have woken us all up to those demands.

The emerging movements, from online-based solidarity networks such as 'Support Art Workers' and 'Musicians in Crisis' to the PMU and other official trade unions, have significant differences in their aspirations and strategies and are often subject to division and fractionalism.⁷⁹ However, despite their differences, they all share a common characteristic: an emphasis on artistic conduct as *work*. Whether predominantly preoccupied with securing allowances for musicians out of work (as is the case with 'Musicians in Crisis'), opposing the Government's right-wing, neoliberal agenda (as the PMU frequently does), or linking the artists' predicaments with wider political and aesthetic imperatives (as has been the contribution of 'Support Art Workers'), the emerging movements have succeeded in coupling creativity in the performing sector with labour demands, in ways that will be long-lasting. As Mihalis told me at the end of our interview: "Whatever happens next, we found each other. It will be harder for them to shut us up again."

Conclusion: Imagining Futures of Music Labour as Love

Above all else, this article has attempted to trace the awakening of a new discourse around music as labour, from the ground up. Mihalis's last words above call attention to this awakening, as it connects to a newfound voice that cannot be silenced because of its collective resonance. Our duty as music academics is to analyze and amplify these voices, in solidarity with striving musicians and with close attention to their words. After all, as Sarah Besky suggests, "how work is talked about is linked to how it is valued and in turn to the social relations it creates, maintains, or destroys".⁸⁰ So even if, to return to Simon Frith's remarks, music's perceived "value is precisely as non-work",⁸¹ valuing those who produce it might indeed require us to acknowledge it as work.

Yet, an attention to the labour of making music need not deny its value as a pleasurable activity, nor does it intend to accentuate differences between 'professional' and 'amateur' musicians. To the contrary, what both the theorizations outlined earlier in the chapter and the ethnographic data from Greek musicians in piling crises suggest, is that music-making can only be pleasurable if it is recognized and valued as the result of intense and all-consuming labour for any musician. This line of thinking can also release us from another omnipresent dichotomy in the study of musical expression, the one between freedom and constraint. I argue here that musical creativity is not fully realized through some bohemian fantasy of freedom. Rather, music is a labour of love that is neither fully unbound nor forcibly subjugated. It is better understood through Elizabeth Povinelli's questions about socialities of love as

79 I discuss the particularities of those trade unions and grassroots movements and their political differences and disjunctures in another publication (TSIOULAKIS forthcoming).

80 BESKY 2020: 129.

81 FRITH 2017: 115.

“the processes by which the dialectic of individual freedom and social bondage is distributed geographically, how social phenomena that contest this distribution are made commensurate with it, and how discourses that arise from this distribution circulate, are localized, and are contested”.⁸² The recent awakenings of musicians to labour demands are such contestations of the unjust and unsustainable distributions of freedom and bondage, in the face of precarity, entrepreneurial individualism, and exploitation. Amidst its devastating impact on the loss of life and livelihood, the pandemic has also provided opportunities to imagine futures of music as a labour of love. Let us take a moment to entertain them.

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82 POVINELLI 2006: 10.

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