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Classical Music Goes Viral: Memeings and Meanings of Classical Music in the Wake of Coronavirus

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As a rich and diverse genre of digital folklore, memes are an integrated part of popular discourses on classical music. Memes provide communicative tools in everyday discourse on aesthetics, the historical canon, music theory, careers and professional life, among other things. During the coronavirus pandemic, classical music memes commenting on different aspects of the outbreak have provided insight into how online classical music communities meme and make sense (and nonsense) of the pandemic within a classical music framework. This article discusses classical music memes relating to the coronavirus in terms of newslore – that is, as folklore that comments on current events – and as a way to playfully expose knowledge of and stances towards different aspects of classical music, the global pandemic and the rules and recommendations of authorities. To conclude, the article suggests that a key function of these memes is their capacity to – in an often humorous fashion – blend together passed-down knowledge, competence and experience from the classical music world with extraordinary current conditions affecting people globally, acting both as social commentary and social safety valves. In doing so, they also uphold a widely held canon, functioning as a non-disputable doxa within the field.



This article is an investigation into representations of classical music in social media in relation to the global pandemic Covid-19. Representation here refers to signifying practices, ways in which people produce cultural meaning (Hall, 1997). From this perspective, 'classical music' as a complex, socially and historically situated cultural phenomenon is always already saturated with innumerable layers of cultural meaning, and different signifying practices in social media add yet new meanings. Representations of classical music, from this perspective, are ways in which people both read and inscribe new meanings in classical music as a cultural text. I will look at internet memes as digitally transmitted forms of expressive culture, that is, as a genre of digital folklore. Memes formulate central common group interests and establish affective alliance. In relation to classical music memes, the Covid-19 pandemic is here understood as a cluster of more or less related boundary objects, which I will elaborate upon later (Bowker and Star, 1999). After an introduction to the wider field of classical music memes, I will show how digital folklore on Covid-19 within online classical music communities to a large extent follows traits seen in other communities, and also how recurring themes are carefully adapted by different users to suit different interlocutors, sometimes in the form of newslore (Frank, 2011). However, the discussed memes also highlight the meeting of pandemic circumstances and the twofold characteristic of classical music humour in social media, displaying both technical and historical competence, and at the same time commenting on the everyday conditions of classical listeners and performers. I will also relate the discussed memes to some aspects in the wider field of online classical music humour. To conclude, I argue that these representations of classical music in the wake of Covid-19 reveal a playful bricolage of public health discourse, classical music knowledge and more subtly addressed existential issues brought on by the pandemic. In doing so, they also tell us something about how classical music has survived its transition into social media meme humour.

Memeing and Meaning: A Folkloristic Approach

In *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins suggests that cultural, meaning-carrying content in the form of memes – small, meaning-carrying building blocks – are passed down and selected in an analogous way to how genes are passed down and gradually selected over time (1976). However, it is not in that specific sense that the term 'meme' thrives in the everyday language of our time, but as a description of often shorter content (e.g. film snippets, combinations of image and text or images) that are created, disseminated, transformed, incorporated into interaction and commented on in various online environments, often some form of social media. In her book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman lists a number of characteristic features of memes, including that they

are 1) pieces of cultural information that are disseminated from person to person and gradually scaled up, 2) propagated by repackaging or imitation and 3) spread through competition or selection (Shifman, 2013: 18–23). There are some similarities between this list of features and how folklore is commonly described. Shifman's book also discusses a number of popular meme genres, some of which will appear in this article too (Shifman, 2013: 99 ff.). The *image macro* is an image with one text in the upper part of the image and another (sometimes in the form of comment or comic turn) in the bottom of the image. Common among image macros are so-called *stock character macros*, in which, for example, well-known people, characters from movies (such as Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*, or Batman and Robin) or viral characters (such as 'Scumbag Steve' or 'Success kid') are given a striking and often funny caption. In classical music memes these are common, with a well-known canon of composers such as Beethoven, Handel or Mozart as recurring stock characters. *Lolcats* is based on the same principle, but instead contains cats, and *rage comics* are short cartoons, often with deliberately simple drawings of characters with recurring roles. Shifman also makes an important distinction between the concepts of 'meme' and 'viral': 'viral' content quickly spreads from person to person and is also shared on new platforms with a potentially wide reach, often with added comments, while 'meme' refers to content that in this process also changes. Viral content refers to individual units, while a meme is always 'a collection of texts': an individual video, in this sense, cannot be a meme, but it is precisely when 'derivatives' (which could be variants, alterations, paraphrases, etc.) occur that we can talk of a meme (Shifman, 2013: 56). If this distinction might seem easy and straightforward, in many cases it is much more difficult, and even more so since users may not always see this difference at all. In relation to Shifman's discussion, I suggest that the images in this article might fruitfully be seen as showing degrees of 'memeness' – while some are clearly derivatives, using well established meme templates, others are viral images, shared in meme groups and incorporated into online interactions in the same way.

Shifman's phrasing 'a collection of texts' points to one of the reasons why I (along with many others) have chosen to regard memes as folklore: just like folk tales, urban legends and other oral traditions, memes are built on dissemination, creativity and interaction, with the same demand to fit genre to context and the same intertextual richness that characterizes oral genres (McNeill, 2017; Palmenfelt, 2007b; Briggs, 1988). Memes are yet another way in which folklore has adapted to new communication technologies. Some of the memes I will discuss here show similarities with what Russel Frank terms 'newslore' – 'folklore that comments on, and is therefore indecipherable without knowledge of, current events' (2011: 7). As Frank points out, there are obvious

similarities between the e-mail jokes he followed in the early 2000s and the ‘folklore by facsimile’, spread via Xerox copies and faxes, which Alan Dundes and Carl Pagter studied in the 1970s (Dundes and Pagter 1992; Frank, 2011: 8).

In relation to the sometimes highly internal knowledge required to decode classical music memes, I will consider the pandemic as a cluster of boundary objects that are related through references to, for example, pandemic, Covid-19, lockdown and quarantine. Objects, in this context, are ‘stuff and things, tools, artifacts and techniques, and ideas, stories and memories – objects that are treated as consequential by community members’ (Bowker and Star 1999: 298; Clarke and Fujimura, 1992). *Boundary objects*, then, are plastic enough to function in the collaboration between different areas of expertise, yet can be stable enough to be productive inside these areas as well. Boundary objects characteristically move back and forth between more solid and delineated meanings and more flexible ones. As Star claims, they allow different groups to work together without consensus (2010: 602). In the context of the pandemic, we might think of ‘working together’ in the sense of collectively making sense (or nonsense) out of the many things that the pandemic ‘is’. I will argue that the pandemic enters the world of classical music memes in the form of boundary objects, enabling not only the meeting of canonized classical music and boundary objects from the pandemic cluster, but also translating the pandemic into the language of classical music memes.

In the larger project on which this article is based, I am interested in how classical music is portrayed, interpreted and negotiated in social media.¹ I have spent a great deal of the last one and a half years on different websites (Instagram, Pinterest, and Reddit, later Facebook and Tumblr) trawling for memes that deal with classical music in different ways. The decision to limit my search to these sites was guided by a wish to account for some of the potential diversity across social media, from platforms that primarily focus on the sharing of visual content to platforms with more text-based interaction; I also wished to engage with differences in demographics across said platforms.² I chose to focus on memes for two reasons. Memes constitute a demarcated element in online interaction; they also multiply and tend to spread far and wide, thereby providing a good basis for understanding key themes in this area of interest, i.e. representations of classical music in social media. Memes are continuously creatively transformed and

¹ The project is a sub-study within the project *Classical Music for a Mediatized World*, funded by the Swedish Research Council.

² For example, in a recent study of Swedish users, there are more women than men on Facebook and Pinterest, and more men than women on Twitter and Reddit; young people prefer TikTok over Facebook and retired people are a growing group on Instagram (Internetstiftelsen, 2020).

thus also offer a way to understand online communication as vernacular expressive behaviour. The memes discussed are all in English, as is the bulk of my material. I have not encountered a single Swedish-language meme in this particular project. A large proportion of both the production and dissemination of memes (in Swedish-language classical music groups too) is carried out in English as an online lingua franca.

During the course of my research I made notes with brief analyses and thoughts on recurring themes and motifs. Each meme was saved both as a picture and as screenshots, including all comments at that point in time. Throughout the work, it became essential to create an overview of other variants on the same meme that were not about classical music. This was in order to establish a memetic³ context to the particular variants of memes I was investigating. In addition, knowyourmeme.com, a site in which community members, researchers and editorial staff investigate and disseminate information about memes and viral online material has been invaluable to my research. In this article, I focus on classical music memes relating to the Covid-19 pandemic that were posted between early March and September 2020. I will return to the details of this project shortly.

Memeing Classical Music

‘Classical music memes are so easy to come up with I could make you a Liszt’. This image macro, featuring a picture of composer Franz Liszt, belongs to a body of memes centred around composers’ names. With anything from ‘Bach street boys’ showing faces of Johann Sebastian Bach pasted onto a picture of the nineties boyband, to Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator as a librarian referring a visitor to ‘Aisle B, Bach’ (as in ‘I’ll be back’, the character’s catch phrase), this type of meme forms an apt point of entry into the world of classical music memes. On the one hand, composers’ names memes exemplify the seriality of memeing, that is, their quality of variations-on-a-theme. In a study on philosophy memes, Violeta Alarcón Zaya discusses a highly similar pattern – just as Handel’s name is used in ‘You just can’t Handel me’, so Immanuel Kant’s name is used in ‘I just Kant’ (Zayas, 2017). On the other hand, such memes also point to the way classical music memes in general tend to uphold a well-established canon of male and mainly European composers (Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Haydn, Handel, Liszt etc., see Citron, 1993). Since they are memes, and usually introduced in a humorous context, these composers can be made fun of, their less agreeable personality traits can be focused on and even their physical attributes can be discussed (Hyltén-Cavallius, 2020; Hyltén-Cavallius, 2021). In a manner reminiscent of Bakhtin’s characterization

³ In this article, ‘memetic’ is an adjective form of ‘meme’, meaning meme-related.

of popular humour, hierarchies are momentarily turned upside-down, and the sacred is desecrated (see Bakhtin, 1986). However, order is usually rapidly restored, sometimes already in the sharer's framing comment, and not least in subsequent comments, for example recommending famous compositions or the composer's relation to other canonized composers.

Meme formats tend to come in waves and adapt to different areas of social life online. The same meme format can be used to portray political conflicts, historical events, celebrities, popular culture or classical music. Thus, the way a meme enters classical music humour can tell us something about perceptions of what classical music 'is' to the members of these online communities. Even if, as previously noted, it is difficult to make generalizations about these communities, they seem to share an interest in classical music and comprise consumers, listeners, amateur musicians, conservatory students, academics and professional musicians. In order to be intelligible, much of the shared material demands not only knowledge of historical composers, but also a minimum level of musical literacy (ability to read music scores, knowledge of music terminology and theory). It is from this base of shared knowledge that a Reddit user can use the 'tú no'-meme⁴ to make jokes about the Locrian mode, or another Reddit user can create a stock character macro with simply the picture of Bach and the text 'Wait a minuet'. If historical and technical subject competence thus forms one basis for both the production and reception of classical music memes, the other basis is performative competence. To American folklorist Charles L. Briggs, competence in the performance of traditional verbal art is not only a matter of delivery (tone, gesture, enactment, prosody and such) but also of how genre is adapted to context (Briggs, 1988: 357 ff.). The same competence is apparent in how memes are produced or shared and commented on in an online context. You can also act competently in the reception and commenting of memes. Here are opportunities to show that one has a sense of what kind of behaviours, expressions and comments are appropriate in this particular context – and in some cases what behaviours will create the most commotion. I have elsewhere referred to this in terms of *digital performative competence* – having to do with one's ability to interpret and manage contexts, genre knowledge, rules (and norm-breaking norms) and, not least, linguistic style (Hyltén-Cavallius, 2020). In the case of classical music, *technical and historical subject competence* becomes an equally important piece of the puzzle, partly because many posts become practically incomprehensible without them,

⁴ The 'tú no' meme consists of a picture with nine squares, of which the central one is something bad or unwanted. Originally created for Netflix Latino's Facebook account, portraying eight well-liked (and one unpopular) secondary TV characters, it rapidly spread to other contexts, such as video game characters, or in this case, the eight accepted church modes and the Locrian in the middle (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/not-you-tu-no>, last accessed 28 October 2020).

and partly because all the tips about further listening, details about composers, the lived experience of being a musician, and so on, can be seen as displays of competence that in these very contexts gain recognition and enhance one's credibility.

Digital folklore – such as memes – tends to lack the restricted audience that has characterized many scholarly definitions of oral folklore, focusing for example on village communities, ethnic groups or social classes (Buccitelli, 2012). Although it is difficult to make generalizations about the commitment and involvement of the members in the studied groups, it is likely that participation in memeing for many takes place on a part-time basis, in short bursts and sometimes with split attention: perhaps a brief scroll through the social media feed in the morning, a quick sharing of a fun or important post, and then maybe nothing again until lunch or on the way home from work or school.⁵ Therefore, it would also be misleading to describe this commitment in terms of a community (at least, in any strong sense of the term) – as it may often be too fleeting, intermittent and erratic. Following Lawrence Grossberg, one could think of these groups in terms of affective alliances (Grossberg, 1997: 44; Hyltén-Cavallius, 2014: 18–19). With this term, Grossberg refers to alliances based on an affective connection with cultural expressions and other members of the alliance. Affect in this context can be understood much like Raymond Williams' 'structure of feeling': a weave of feelings, shaped by collective experiences that also create common ways of emotionally orientating oneself in the shaping of new experiences (1980: 110). Such an affective alliance has to do with ways of collectively 'feeling' – that is, both ways of relating to shared objects and others, and ways of forming knowledge – within the alliance.⁶ Described as an affective alliance, we do not have to assume evenly distributed commitment, any protracted continuity or even extensive shared values, but we can assume that among the participants there is a commonly shared way of relating to, for example, iconic composers, musical skills and classical music literacy.

Viral Memes

Social media, especially during the onset of the pandemic, was flooded with memes addressing the topic in different ways. In early March 2020 I joined two Facebook groups, the Norway-based 'Koronavirusmeme-sentralen' (the Coronavirus meme

⁵ As mentioned previously, the studied groups focus on a highly specific form of amusement: sharing memes and humor about classical music. The kinds of long-term active engagement described in ethnographies of virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008) or social media groups that are more integrated into members' everyday lives (Horst, 2020) are therefore quite unlikely in these contexts.

⁶ In the same passage (*ibid.*), Williams remarks that 'structure of experience' might have been more fitting, pointing to the complex interplay of experience and feeling he sought to capture with the concept.

central) and the US-based ‘Coronavirus memes’, and also made a call from my personal Facebook account on 20 March asking all ‘friends’ to send me any coronavirus memes they stumbled upon. A telling comment from one contributor was ‘Are you sure about this?’, referring to the enormous amount of memes produced daily around the world. The memes centred on a few themes, such as life during quarantine, hoarding practices (such as excessive consumption of toilet paper), regulations and hygiene recommendations, social distancing, coughing, virus spreaders and humorous portrayals of a post-pandemic utopia (for example, with extinct species returning). Looking at coronavirus-related humour in social media in general, these themes were also common in genres other than memes.

This picture (see **Figure 1**), based on the original print of the libretto to *Die Zauberflöte*, and portraying Emanuel Schikaneder in the role of Papageno, was added by user zchwalz to the subreddit ‘r/ClassicalMemes’ on 26 May 2020 with the caption ‘Papageno in 2020’ (u/zchwalz, 2020). The overt message is, in a way, simple: due to face mask regulations, a song will sound very different, more like humming perhaps. However, to interlocutors with further subject competence, this meme suggests other



Figure 1: “Papageno in 2020”. u/zchwalz 2020 ‘Papageno in 2020’, Reddit. 26 May.

interpretive dimensions. In Mozart's opera, Papageno's mouth is sealed with a lock after he has wrongly taken the credit for killing a giant snake, and he then hums before being released from the lock. Another example is a picture of a flute cover (covering both face, hands and traverse flute), posted in the Facebook group 'Classical Music Humor', which is a bona fide product marketed by McCormick's (an online store for marching bands, pageants, etc.) in the wake of the coronavirus. Posted on 27 August, this post had received 1800 likes, 641 comments and 512 reposts by September 18, 2020. Here a serious marketing attempt generated lots of humorous comments, but also ones trying to figure out whether the original post was serious or a joke. It is an example of how online marketing material is transformed into memes through recontextualization and commentary. Read literally, both these memes are used to comment on the interface between government regulations, disease control and musical performance. On a symbolic level, however, they also address more existential aspects, namely the muting of music, as Papageno's song becomes a hum and wind instruments concealed in black bags suggest body bags. The meme with Papageno's humming and face mask is polysemic, allowing for multiple parallel interpretations: it simultaneously alludes to the silencing taking place within the opera itself, to the silencing of musical performance in the time of the pandemic, and to disease prevention in general.

Another aspect of limiting the spread of the virus concerned different hygiene recommendations, such as the use of hand sanitizers and washing techniques.⁷ The World Health Organization recommended washing hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water, which became a widely embraced standard in different countries. But how was one to know when 20 seconds had passed? In many places, music was given the role of timekeeping. Swedish health authorities for example recommended singing 'Blinka lilla stjärna' ('Twinkle, twinkle little star') in order to help children wash their hands for long enough.⁸ Such recommendations soon led to a multitude of music memes, such as the one suggesting four 'Hey now, hey now nows' (likely referring to 'This Corrosion', a 1987 song by the rock band The Sisters of Mercy) for goth fans, or a meme that comments on the format differences between different kinds of music (see **Figure 2**).

⁷ This theme also featured in humorous videos such as 'Coronavirus étude: for piano and disinfecting wipe' featuring a pianist first sanitizing his hands, followed by a careful notated sanitation of the keyboard and finally a bow to an empty concert auditorium (<https://www.facebook.com/MusicTraveler/videos/203196247645593/>, last accessed 28 October 2020).

⁸ See: <https://www.1177.se/Stockholm/liv--halsa/sunda-vanor/sa-har-tvattar-du-handerna/>. Incidentally, they also recommended 30 seconds, in contrast to the Swedish Public Health Agency which followed WHO's suggestion of 20 seconds.



Figure 2: Hand washing to whole symphonies. Classical Music Humor 2020b 'When the WHO recommends washing', Facebook. 17 April.

The meme, posted on 16 April in the Facebook group 'Classical Music Humor', shows two hands, wrinkled from what looks like lengthy immersion in water, accompanied by a comment about the effects of washing hands for entire symphonies. But why symphonies, as opposed to, say, sonatas or concertos? The symphony can be seen as iconic for classical music in the popular imagination and connotes not only length but also complexity in structure and massive force. That is, the use of symphony in this meme speaks both to popular notions of what classical music 'is' and to the symphony's status as a pinnacle of musical unification. There is a tendency in classical music memes to comment on aspects that unite classical music in relation to other kinds of music, usually in a humorous and drastic way: while other music can be portrayed as simple, classical music is seen as complex, and if, for example, pop songs are conceived as monotonous and easy to learn, classical pieces are seen as demanding and requiring much practice (which is yet another theme in these memes). The prominence of these aspects, which, based on the comments, seem to be widely accepted within the studied groups, suggests that the memes here primarily serve an alliance-strengthening function. That is to say, by pointing to that which is already known and widely embraced, they are not created to ridicule (such as some viola memes) or stir debate (such as memes comparing different composers), but instead constitute a rhetorical common ground within the alliance, a basic knowledge that can stimulate a sense of common affective orientation. In this way, they contribute to the establishment of an affective alliance around classical music humour (c.f. Hyltén-Cavallius and Kaijser, 2012). This way of representing classical music as purportedly more complex and sophisticated in relation to other music genres, albeit in a crucially humorous fashion, constitutes a memetic continuation of a way of

hierarchically organizing classical music, both in relation to other genres and within the genre itself, with concrete social and material consequences for people active both within and outside the field of classical music (Bull and Scharff, 2021).

On 9 March 2020, *The Verge* reported on the handwashing lyrics generator ‘Wash your lyrics’, which also came to function as a meme generator of sorts. In the subreddit ‘r/ClassicalMemes’, ‘An die Freude’ was posted with the caption ‘I got bored and found a website so I proudly present “how to wash your hands with Beethoven”’.⁹ In another post from Instagram account ‘classical.music.memes’, the beginnings of two music pieces – ‘Caro mio ben’ and ‘Erlkönig’ – are captioned ‘me washing my hands in 2019’ and ‘me washing my hands in 2020’ respectively (classical.music.memes, 2020).

Both the portrayed pieces belong to the well-known classical canon, and likely many viewers will, when reading the titles, recognize them and remember the music. The character of the two pieces could not be more different. The 2019 handwashing was performed *larghetto* (fairly slow), in 2020 it was *schnell* (quickly), and while in 2019 it was performed with sparsely placed notes, in 2020 the tempo was much higher with densely placed triplets (and a metronome mark of 152 bpm). The notation here works on two levels: visually, it portrays the detail and accuracy in handwashing in the wake of the coronavirus as compared to before; symbolically, pre-pandemic handwashing is associated with Romanticism, while in 2020 it is an activity performed under the shadow of a looming threat.

The use of notation as a graphic way to describe non-musical phenomena is a recurring theme in classical music memes. Sheet music, not surprisingly a common feature in classical music memes, can be used to comment on social structures within



Figure 3: Washing hands in 2019 compared to 2020. classical.music.memes 2020 ‘Me washing my hands’, Instagram. 14 March.

⁹ Posted by @auferstehn on 1 July 2020.

the world of classical music, as in a set of notes entitled ‘Sight reading audition’ posted on Pinterest (see **Figure 3**).¹⁰ You don’t have to spend very long in classical music circles online to understand that these sight-reading auditions are a big stressor for young musicians.¹¹ There are tips on ways to handle the stress and simple tricks to succeed and participants who support each other in their worries or joke about their feelings before a test. What makes ‘Sight reading audition’ interesting is that it is divided into two sections: the top consists of two staves with the heading ‘Males’, the lower of four staves with the heading ‘Females’. The tempo indication for men is ‘Take your time – the rhythm should be free from any kind of rigid tempo’, while for the women the metronome mark is stated precisely to a high 267. The men’s notes thus consist of two staves with sparsely placed whole, half and quarter notes in 4/4, while the women’s four staves start at 17/32, then rapidly change to 13/8, include high note values, many accidentals and rapidly changing dynamics. In short, the notes look unplayable, and are also placed after the men’s, with strict requirements and more notes to perform at a higher pace. This meme shows how male players are given greater latitude in contrast to the more rigorous demands placed on female musicians. On a symbolic level, it speaks to the unequal conditions of audition practices and the odds against other performers than white males. In its playful exaggerations, this meme is reminiscent of the photocopy and faxlore of pre-digital offices – for example, cartoons, images, stories or ‘news’ that would often comment on workplace rules, routines and hierarchies – but here comments on gender inequality in classical music (Dundes and Pagter, 1992).

One of the early measures taken to prevent the spread of coronavirus was what was first introduced in terms of ‘social distancing’, but this was gradually supplemented with ‘physical distancing’. Generally, people were advised to keep two metres (six feet) apart. These recommendations became the source of an outburst of online humour, or rather something in between humour and health information. In Sweden, you would find recommendations to keep a moose calf between you and others, while in Yukon in Canada it would be a caribou. One of the first distancing measures to find its way into classical music groups was a Japanese sign showing a double-bass lying down, shared in early April in a number of orchestra- and double-bass-related Facebook groups.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.pinterest.se/pin/653022014701077071/>, last accessed 15 October 2020.

¹¹ In an ongoing work on classical music culture in contemporary cinema, Tobias Pontara discusses a perfectionist ideal central to classical music, ‘a musical culture in which performance is above all a question of precision and perfection’ (Pontara, 2021). Pontara relates this ideal to Goodman’s discussion of classical music performance as essentially the performance of a ‘work’ – that is, a note by note rendition of the composition – which also implies that a single missed or misarticulated note would no longer be the same ‘work’ (ibid, cf. Goodman, 1976: 210). This contextualization explains why the performance of a piece at first glance in front of a panel puts extreme pressure on the performer.

Soon enough, an English language version with a fully extended trombone appeared (posted in the Facebook group ‘Classical Music Humor’ on 15 June).

These uses of instruments’ physical dimensions as a device to teach people about correct distancing soon led to further memes, such as one posted in classical music groups (but likely referring to jazz) depicting a double-bass player placed in a street corner playing a solo in order to keep people away and another about sales of social-distancing musical instruments. Memes about distancing were, however, not confined to instruments – another meme showed three different ways to notate a C triad: before coronavirus (in single note stave), during lockdown (three staves with one note in each), and after re-opening (together in one stave, but distanced).

Hygiene and distancing recommendations are thus in various ways brought into the language of classical music memes. Even if the primary aim of these memes is to entertain, they also disseminate health information. The fully extended trombone (please see **Figure 4**) or hand washing to ‘An die Freude’ work as ‘translations’ of health information from a public health discourse – that is, an objective, informative and not very entertaining tone – to a classical music meme discourse where entertainment is pivotal and, like much other humour, arises from the clash between different discourses.



Figure 4: Social distancing using trombones. Classical Music Humor 2020a ‘Please practice social distancing’, Facebook. 15 June.

Visualizing Spread and Spreading Visualizations

Quite early on, it was clear that the pandemic would at least partially take the memetic form of *newslore*. Not all classical music memes are newslore – the knowledge needed to ‘decipher’ them, as stated above, usually rather has to do with musical literacy and knowledge of music history, instruments and the social worlds of classical music. One example will serve to shed light on coronavirus-related newslore in classical music.

One of the primary ways in which the spread of the coronavirus was communicated to a wider public was through the use of graphs. Health authorities would use them to describe both national and international development of Covid-19, showing the numbers of infected and deceased, comparing the development in different areas and different countries but also displaying different scenarios and illustrating the need to flatten the curve of the infection. Coronavirus memes quickly made these graphs their own. One meme which generated many variants portrayed the development over time of the need for different everyday resources during the pandemic, such as coffee, alcohol or cars. ‘Flattening the curve’ was a meme template that accommodated many different phenomena, such as global capitalism. In the world of classical music memes, the curve took on the form shown in **Figure 5**.

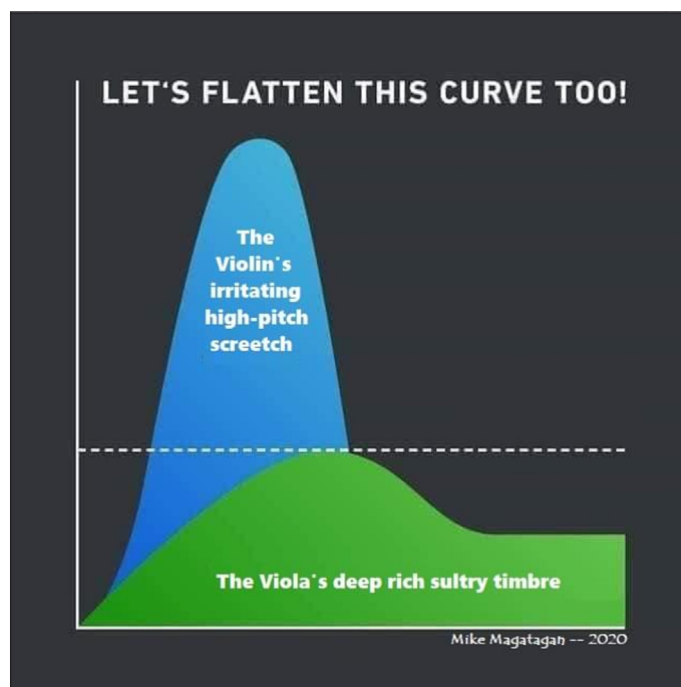


Figure 5: Flattening the curve. Viola-Memes 2020 ‘Let’s flatten this curve too’, Facebook. 27 April.

According to knowyourmeme.com, the ‘flatten the curve’ meme originated as a campaign to demonstrate the difference in transmission with versus without preventative measures such as social distancing and home working.¹² Even if some meme variants followed this original message, others used the graph – which, following the coronavirus pandemic, has become a highly current cultural reference for social media users globally – in order to discuss other matters in a humorous manner. This one, created by Mike Magatagan, was posted in the Facebook group Viola-Memes on 27 April, and rapidly reposted in other related groups such as Classical Music Humor. The vast majority of ‘Viola-Memes’ posts are memes created by Magatagan and tend to either praise the viola or, just as often, criticize the violin. The aim of the group is described as follows: ‘The Viola has been the undeserved recipient of many a hurtful joke or meme. This page is devoted to promoting the Viola in a positive light’.¹³ This aim refers to the wider context of classical music memes and humour, where the viola is often made fun of as being too easy, boring or just incomprehensible (for example, the alto clef associated with the instrument is often made fun of as being obsolete or unintelligible), which again calls attention to how the valuation of complexity organizes hierarchies within the field of classical music itself (Bull and Scharff, 2021). This graph brings to the fore a number of interpretive frameworks: for example, a shared cultural reference point in the wake of the coronavirus, the wider landscape of classical music humour in social media and the viola’s status both on- and offline. The graph, read with the initial campaign context in mind, uses symbolic language employed in a critical situation to elevate the viola at the cost of the violin in a humorous way. On another symbolic level, the very act of producing and sharing this viola meme with its allusion to the symbolic language of the pandemic, in a time of global crisis, might be read not only as a way of addressing a worrying situation through symbolic means, but also as a refusal to submit to extraordinary circumstances through the use of ‘ordinary’ viola humour.

Cataclysmic events tend not only to leave traces in collective memory in the form of both personal and mediated experience, but can also alter the way we think and the language we use, if only slightly. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of words entered colloquial language, and familiar words gained new dimensions in the context of pandemic-related events. In the groups and accounts I followed, these words were incorporated in meme form through posts teaching basic rhythmic patterns through pandemic-related words. One example was this ‘COVID-19 Rhythm lesson’ posted in the Facebook group ‘Classical Music Humor’ on 29 March 2020 (**Figure 6**).

¹² See: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/flattenthecurve>. This was originally a twitter post by user @drewaharris on 27 February 2020.

¹³ See: https://www.facebook.com/ViolaMemes/?ref=page_internal, last accessed 23 September 2020.

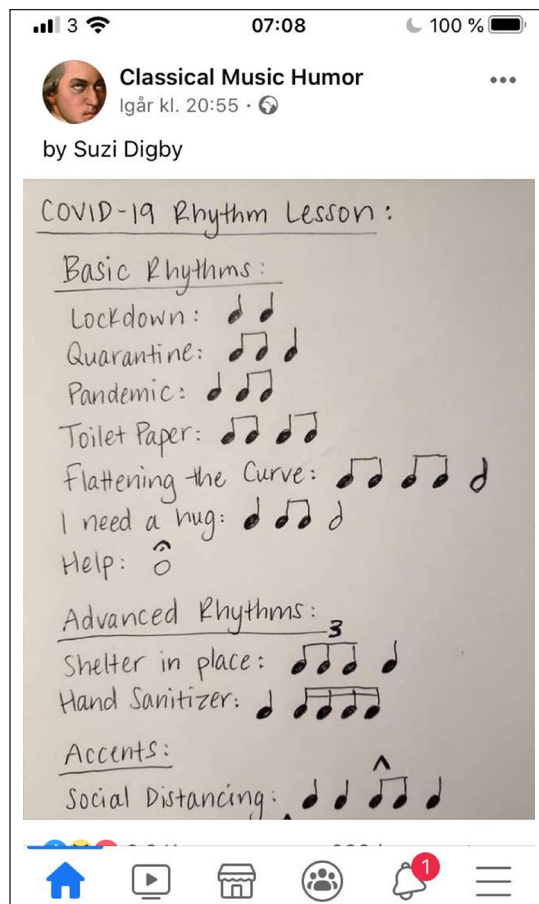


Figure 6: Covid-19 Rhythm Lesson. Suzi Digby 2020 'Covid-19 Rhythm Lesson.' Classical Music Humor, Facebook. 29 March.

Some of the terms and phrases used in this meme, such as 'pandemic' or 'lockdown', are technical in nature. Other references are not, though they acquired particular valence during the Covid-19 pandemic. 'Toilet paper' alludes to the hoarding practices seen across many countries in the early phase of the pandemic, and 'I need a hug' reads as a comment relating to recommendations on physical distancing and quarantine. 'Help' is given an extra dimension through the rhythmic pattern, a semibreve with a fermata,¹⁴ which seems more like a drawn-out cry rather than a short utterance. The use of words and word combinations in the teaching of rhythmic patterns is an established pedagogical tool and will likely be familiar to members of the group. Here the lesson incorporates boundary objects in the form of pandemic-related words, bridging pandemic with in-group knowledge.

¹⁴ A semibreve is a note with a time value equal to two minims or four crotchets; a fermata is a sign indicating that the note should be prolonged beyond its normal duration.

Outside the meme format, but shared in various classical music groups and from music-related accounts such as Instagram's *musiciantee*, the idea of making music out of pandemic-related concepts is taken even further. Youtuber Nicholas Papadimitriou's 'Covid-19 fugue', originally posted on 5 May and with almost two million views by late October, uses a sequence of notes based on the word 'Covid-19' as the starting point of a fugue.¹⁵ The pandemic and its associated glossary thus becomes the basis for both humour and musical exploration. What can classical music memes tell us about both the pandemic itself and the specific role of classical music in social media during the pandemic? Notable in the groups and accounts that I have followed is the relative absence of memes explicitly addressing contemporary political issues. 2020 was also the year that the Black Lives Matter movement gained international recognition, and a year of intense debates on representation and access across a range of contexts. News of the bushfires in Australia in early 2020 tapped into a transnational awareness of the global climate crisis. One would expect events such as these to resurface in classical music memes, as they have in other areas of the memescape. During the summer of 2020, there was a surge in Twitter memes (which, as mentioned previously, lie outside the scope of this study) contributing to a recurrent discussion around the question 'was Beethoven black?', which could be interpreted as a memetic take on current debates around representation (Rennex, 2020). But the relative absence of these pressing issues in my material also demonstrates how classical music is understood among members and subscribers of the studied groups and accounts. As I stated in the introduction, the humorous function of memes serves both to question and to maintain group norms and boundaries (Billig, 2005: 202 ff.).

One way to interpret the relative absence of issues of representation – especially in relation to the frequency of pandemic-related material – is that the virus SARS-CoV-2 constitutes a common enemy that threatens the music industry and the performing arts regardless of position, whereas the aforementioned political issues bring to the fore in-group differences. This again reinforces the impression of meme-sharing within these groups and accounts as fundamentally group-affirming, along the lines of Zayas' observation concerning the network-enforcing character of humorous philosophy memes (2017). Classical music memes tend to work from an established canon and shared competences, but memes relating to the pandemic also show that both canon and competences can be integrated into current events without questioning their common doxa. Famous opera characters can become memes, and rhythmic exercise patterns used to explore pandemic language, but in doing so, they affirm central

¹⁵ See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_i8qdfW5u8, last accessed 5 May 2020.

values and competences in a classical music affective alliance. Memes, often humorous and frequently political, came to function as discursive tools during the pandemic (cf. Denisova, 2019). Through memes, ‘pro-vaxxers’ ridiculed and criticized ‘anti-vaxxers’, while sceptics ridiculed mask wearers. Such overt uses of memes as means of political critique was not present in the groups and accounts that I followed. A possible interpretation of this absence is that the persistent notion of Western art music as made up of autonomous and timeless ‘works’ independent of social or cultural contexts is also reflected in the phenomenon of memeing among online enthusiasts of the art form (cf. Goehr, 1992). However, as I have shown, these memes must also be understood as instrumental in the shaping of an affective alliance, and here the alliance-upholding benefits in not addressing potentially controversial issues and rather maintaining common ground can also help to explain the absence of (other) pressing political and social issues.

Even if caused by a single virus and its mutations, the pandemic cannot be experienced as a single phenomenon. As stated previously, the pandemic can rather be understood as a kind of overarching concept that clusters together disparate phenomena. The pandemic reached us in the form of a virus, but also in the form of graphs portraying transmission and death rates, government regulations on face masks and public gatherings, ‘social distancing’ and travel restrictions. In the next section, I will return to how we might understand both the various ways in which the pandemic was interpreted in classical music memes, and in classical music itself, in terms of boundary objects.

Translations, or How the Coronavirus was Incorporated into Online Classical Music Discourse

People used the diagnosis of hysteria for purposes of social control as well as for medical treatment. It became a category through which physicians, social theorists, and novelists discussed pain and anxiety and, arguably, the changing social status of women. The point is not who believed what when but rather that the category became an object existing in both communities. It was a medium of communication, whatever else it may also have been. (Bowker and Star, 1999: 298)

Just as the diagnosis of hysteria became a boundary object, allowing different professions to discuss a number of issues, so did the pandemic enter the world of classical music memes not as a singularity but as a cluster of more or less related boundary objects. The boundary objects allowed participants to interpret a global crisis in meme format and yet continue to draw on classical music, its instruments and canonized works. Pandemic

language innovations became rhythm pattern illustrations; a face mask was added to an iconic libretto. Crucially, these boundary objects tend to point in both directions: the rhythm pattern both to the semantic context of the words and to the potential multitude of rhythm practice experiences of different musicians, the face mask on Papageno both to a specific scene in the opera, current experiences of actual masks and the symbolic silencing of music.

Graphs (such as in **Figure 5**), abstractions used in news reports and public information to symbolize the spread of disease with and without different measures, were intentionally construed as boundary objects, used in order to communicate between, for example, public health professionals, politicians and the general public. Among this general public, some of these graphs will also be used to produce memes that jokingly address completely different topics, such as violin versus viola, or the global spread of capitalism. When I say ‘use’, this refers to both the actual figure of a curve, but also to the current discussion – and, hopefully, awareness – of disease transmission that it alludes to. This is also a key aspect of the term ‘newslore’ as employed in this essay: it is (digital) folklore that in various ways refers to or, in ever so slightly altered versions, reiterates current events.

To return to the question of representation that was raised at the beginning of this article, how can one then understand classical music in relation to the coronavirus? Classical music, from the perspective of memes, is an overarching concept that comes to us in the form of, for example, musical instruments, canonized composers and sheet music. As discussed in the introduction to this article, classical music memes usually refer to a well-known canon, and this is clear also in the pandemic-related memes discussed above: among the composers referred to we find Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven. Even if classical music memes often make fun of historical composers, two aspects are striking: both their reinforcement of the canon – even when treated as an object of mockery – and the way the status of these figures tends to be rapidly restored in comments. As mentioned in passing previously, canon here seems to function somewhat like the doxa of social fields, as discussed by Bourdieu (1977). That is, canon as a doxa in classical music memes can be elevated or mocked – or both – but its make-up is presented as being indisputable and ‘natural’. Rather than questioning established taste hierarchies and historiographies, classical music memes use humour to unsettle the canon, temporarily, while ultimately strengthening it.

There is an important difference between, for example, the Papageno image and the mask that the meme introduces. While understanding the image as representing Papageno, a prominent character in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, demands specific knowledge of classical music, the mask has been a well-known feature in public

discourse during most of the pandemic. While a limited set of icons of classical music, perhaps the images of Beethoven or Mozart, could be said to sometimes function as boundary objects, much of what is going on in the memeing of classical music does not have these qualities, but rather relies on substantial ‘insider’ knowledge in order to be interpretable. In short, classical music memes during the pandemic use boundary objects to comment on and relate to the pandemic, but at their centre is an affective alliance binding its members together through a common directedness towards competences and knowledge. The coronavirus pandemic is translated into a common classical music meme language, consisting of canonized music and musical literacy. The work involved in this translation is, more than anything else, focused on making people laugh. But all this work also allows the members of these groups to speak of that which is burdensome – from lockdowns to distancing, from cancelled performances to the existential threat of the disease itself. Music and the performing arts in general were in many places severely hit by restrictions and lockdowns, and the silencing of music symbolically portrayed in some of these memes must also be understood as a social commentary. The memes here act as ‘social safety valves’, as William Bascom once described a basic function of folklore (1954: 343). And it is perhaps here that we find the purpose of these memes, in their binding together of not only a classical music alliance, but also of the extraordinary conditions of the pandemic with the everyday life of classical music, and of laughter with seriousness.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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