

The sound of silence, body language and rhythm and music in pandemic ages

Caring and Sharing: Health and Humanities in Today's World

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The silence of the virus, before it shouted on February 20, 2020

New evidence shows how **the virus was already in Italy from mid-January**. This belief is strengthened by the fact that some physicians had positive swab test results on the 25th of February, and it is reasonable to think that the contagion happened days before the test.

Moreover, it also has to be considered that COVID-19 presented itself, at first, to be an asymptomatic virus making it **extremely difficult to identify any suspect cases** prior to the appearance of symptoms.

From a research published on Nature Communication, between February and April 2020 there were at least **seven viral lineages in Lombardy**.



Why we didn't see it?

*We knew it was coming but we didn't know when... Man is playing with fire, the issue is ecological: we are going to upset the balance of nature forever. The air, pollution, the exploitation of the earth without respect... And yes, viruses are spilling over because **we should leave certain species alone**. (Giovanni Albano, Head of ICU, Humanitas Hospital, Bergamo)*

<https://www.medicinanarrativa.eu/conversazione-con-giovanni-albano>



Work, trades, football

The ongoing trade between factories around Bergamo (involving 4000 workers) and different regions of China was maintained until the beginning of the Province lock down on the 8th of March.

As reported in the official communication to the government by Lombardy Medical Council, general practitioners lack of individual protection devices during their routine activity could have further eased the Sars-CoV2 spreading in the population.

An important role might also be attributed to a football match that took place on 19th of February in Milan with an audience of more than 40,000 people (the majority coming from the Bergamo hinterland).



The sound of silence

Anaesthesiologists and people in intensive care, during March and April 2020 reported that there was only a **shocking Silence**, witnessing the overwhelming death in Bergamo, Brescia and Milano: even people “trained” to see death as anaesthesiologists in intensive care were traumatized by the devastating force of the “virus”.

Silence was the sovereign of the corridors, where only few weeks before the soundscape was made by doctors and nurses chatting, patients waiting and caregivers speaking low voice: now, opening the doors in the ICU (all the main hospitals were efficiently transformed in ICUs), the only dominant sound was that of the **ventilators, with their low pitches recalling fictions science movies**, to break this silence.

*The thing that struck me most was **the silence in the corridors**: you have to know that in a hospital the corridors are always public places of passage, people, relatives, doctors, nurses, stretchers, it's a bustle, but the corridors were empty. (Giovanni Albano)*



The IPD limited empathic communication

Doctors and nurses were completely dressed up with personal protection, made by long-sleeved water-resistant gown, wearing face shield masks, gloves: their bodies were very limited in movements, **with barriers to let the voice out, and hurdles to listening, and with a very limited visual horizon.**

Every guideline to build empathy as in the pre-pandemic age was basically not applicable anymore: the creation of a safe space as in the rules of Stephen Porges, according to his Polyvagal Theory, given by the harmonic pitch of the voice, the gestures, the prolonged eye contact, the touch, the soft light, the containment of noises due to artificial technology could not be in place.

The **huge despair and grief petrified the verbalization in the ICUs:** eventually tears were shed among colleagues as released words after nights in which when dozens of people died in every hospital.

(Still the verbalization in 2021, apart a few “narrative people” is very difficult, following the burden of the second wave: **trauma and post traumatic stress disorder is in place**).



A new gazing at for establishing relationship

Eyes of health care professionals were fundamental in body language: since mouths were covered, **the eyes were the only glimpsable part of the left open face**; the gazing at the other person was given to provide **comfort and compassion**, each smiling under a mask had an impact on the eye's lateral folds, and in case of embarrassment and too strong emotions to stand, **the avoidance of looking** at the situation, as self-shield defence.

As far as patients, when they could, they used their eyes as well, and, if things were going better in their health status, as body gesture, **they rose up their thumbs**, when voice was missing since deteriorated by the ventilation technique.



The silence of wearing protective clothing

There was another kind of silence which characterised life in the ICU, apart from the lack of words during the ritual of dressing before starting the shift: it was a “not hollow silence” during the communication of news to family members, at dawn every day, on the phone. A silence which meant listening and which was inhabited each time by the possibility of hope of a night better than the previous one and of a new day better than the one before.

“... The possibility of knowing how their loved ones were doing was linked to a telephone call in the morning in which you had to tell them how the night had gone: you also told them that the patient was ill and you had to use your words to make the person on the other end of the phone, whom you did not know and who did not know you, imagine the situation. Your voice was the image of what was happening, and it fell on the other end in a silence of listening and waiting for good news, which most of the time did not come.

It happened to phone home to announce the death of a patient. After a few minutes, his son phoned me back, thanking me for everything we were doing. This left me very perplexed because the announcement of a death was matched by a thank you: why? I don't know why... maybe because the perception of the seriousness of everything and that the doctors were doing everything they could was very strong at that time.” (Elena Vavassori)



From silence to rhythm

As time went by, doctors found new ways to cope with the situation: one afternoon in middle March an Intensivist in Lombardy, tired of this enduring silence, dared to put on a play list, with Latin-American and disco music in intensive care, at a low volume as a soft background: things suddenly changed.

Doctors and Nurses were moving their bodies according to the rhythm; and even some patients who had enough energy to lift up only one finger, lifted up that finger. **Rhythm was pervasive and was the right thing at the right time.**

The doctor when preparing herself to go away since her shift was over, turned off the music and went to say hello as she is used to do regularly with the patients: one who could talk, in a whisper said to her: **“Thank you, this afternoon was one of the most amusing times of my life.”**

The music on worked to cheer up the general mood allowing the body to move.



The rhythm of Nature

“Body” is a universal word, belonging to the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, discovered by Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goodard: it is a word present in brain patterns of the human kind.

The rhythm possibly has invited physical movements despite the stiff gowns, suits and masks. Rhythm is thought to be Universal sound since the first sound human beings hear is the mother’s heartbeat in her womb, even before the birth, together with the regular and constantly repeated sounds of maternal respiration.

The drum is an instrument that was invented and adopted for use in music in every culture, and its amplitude contour is such that it conforms to the sound of the pulse as heard from the womb: it looks like that to counteract that huge ocean of sorrow, at that time, the ancestral rhythm, played in the dance of the health care operators among the patients’ bed, was the possible language, beyond any words to be said.

It was like a new beginning of human beings, a lively pulse to defeat the dying embedded in Natural sounds.



Music for not forgetting



Donizetti's Requiem Mass, the space for words is dutifully limited, and addressed only to essential reflections. Here in Bergamo, this evening, there is the Italy that has suffered, that has been wounded, that has wept: *Everyone remembers the line of army lorries taking the coffins of the dead to Covid in other cities because in Bergamo there was no more room at the cemetery and crematorium...*

The orchestra and choir of the Donizetti Opera festival, spaced out and wearing masks, performed the composition in a climate of suffering - several orchestras have lost family members to the virus - and at the same time full of dignity. In 2020, Bergamo had +500% of the average mortality of the previous years. The highest rate of the first wave.



The Italian trial with music during the pandemic to overcome PTSD and burn out

In May 2020, although very few randomized trials were conducted on drugs to fight COVID-19, in Italy a first randomized study was undertaken to evaluate [the effect of two sound play lists, a Breathing and an Energy playlist, on health care operators](#) (Giordano, 2020).

Why Music? Because listening to music or playing or singing music can reduce the body's levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. This can impact sleep quality and blood pressure, memory and brain function.



Two sound playlists; Breathing and Energy

In the relaxation play list (Breathing) music tracks were selected on the basis of the steady pulse; quiet mood; predictable melodic lines; little dynamic change; supportive bass line; stability in volume, timbre, rhythm, harmony and pitch; simple structure; and clear form. *The Breathing play list was structured by selections from classical music of the Western tradition and modern selections with similar feature.*

By contrast, in the “stimulating” play list (Energy) music tracks were more changeable in instrumentation and in dynamic flow, unpredictable in melodic lines, volume, timbre, rhythm, harmony, pitch, loose structure and unclear form. Bass lines could range from supportive to non-supportive. All playlists were 15–20 minutes in length. A listening guideline was created for all the PLs (*“Find a quiet and comfortable space,” “close your eyes,” “focus on an image or a color,” “breathe slowly,”* etc.).



The research of personal sounds

After one week of Standard play lists, all emotions on validated psychometric tools improved: customized play lists were prepared for the different health care professionals and the results versus the standard play list were striking. *The customized Breathing Playlist generated a substantial variation in the emotional status with a significant decrease in the intensity of perceived sadness, increase in energy level, and increase in serenity level.*

After the initial shock, which left most of us living in Lombardy speechless, and that required the universal beat of our mother's nature, things evolved up to the possibility to choose the sounds: *to each his/her own music when illness comes.* Not only for patients, with standardized music therapy, but also for doctors, nurses and all carers.



And at home? The pillars for wellbeing during the first wave

We have asked to art therapists, teachers of health humanities and philosophers, and normal citizens at Home,—from worldwide countries as Italy, UK, Portugal, Spain, USA, Canada—to write down the pillars for wellbeing during the lock down (period ranging in March-April 2020) according to the [biological, psychological, social and spiritual model](#), an upgrade by the World Health Organization in 2015 of the bio-socio-psychological model of the in 2015.

This matrix was chosen to overcome the reductionism of the biomedical model to promote wellbeing.





Biological:

Taking care of the body. Healthy and fresh regular food.

Move outside (if it is allowed) and inside the house.
Every half an hour sit up and walk or do some exercise.

Yoga, meditation, breath, dance and sing. Body rest.

Body esthetics. Keep a circadian rhythm

Hug yourself if alone or the people around you

Mens sana in corpore sano.

Clean the house: it is like a temple

Mental:

Stay away from infodemia. Only once a day check the news.

Concentrate on tasks and activities.

Distractions on the news are easy and toxic.

The pandemic will pass, there will be no return to as it was before but possibilities for a new after. Change is the word is requested.

Restore psychologically with things you like (seeing fictions, or art)

Social:

it's a physical distance not a social distance. More interconnections than before. Gratitude to technology, zoom and skype, learn to use them. Virtual cocktails, and coffees. Encouraging positive information. Stay away from social where too much anger and desire to argue unconditionally are there. Select the people.

Gratitude to friends and relatives.

Even if isolated at home, everyone is playing an active role.

Spiritual:

contact with nature, both the open environment as well as the sunshine at the window. The earth, thanks to this humankind stop is regenerating. Hope that this will last after pandemic. Take more time for yourself-. Discover new relationship.

Prepare the legacy. Enjoy the here and now. Pray, if you believe.

BE and not DO

Listen to music, whatever it is



Pillars for wellbeing during the first wave

Many “mental” tips were as well put in the “biological” part, since for all these experts there is an interconnection between body and mind. As well as for the spiritual part some of our experts, indicated the importance of social relations. In fact, **the four dimensions are indeed interrelated, and it is very difficult to define clear borders among the four determinants.** It is like an osmotic process, with no walls among the borders but biological membranes, where the reflections do belong, according also the reader’s eyes to possible different sectors.



Dance and Music belong to Body and Soul

Dance and singing (belonging to the Music art) were classified mainly in two dimensions, the biological one and the spiritual one. *Biological side since the effects of dancing and singing reverberate on body and mind wellbeing and spiritual side, since music is somehow considered, together with *Being in the Nature*, as the Elected Language, which trespasses the ambiguity and limits of word communication and somehow generates peace and serenity into the turmoil of this dystopian life.*

However, the people who contributed to the building of these pillars were indicating different kinds of Music, from disco for dancing to sacred anthems, again highlighting the importance of the personal taste.

Marini MG, *Authentic Connection: Music, Spirituality, and Wellbeing*. Peter Lang Edition, Director Prof. June Boyce-Tillmann, University of Oxford



The unspeakable meaning

The reason is that *the level of sound is much more primitive in our consciousness than the level of speech.*

Sound is related to our deepest, to the *very first levels of consciousness: those appearing already in the period before birth.* The level of speech and language, however, is a very specialized one acquired by the child only from about the age of three years old: *the brain areas mainly concerned with sound perception and those concerned with speech are not the same.*

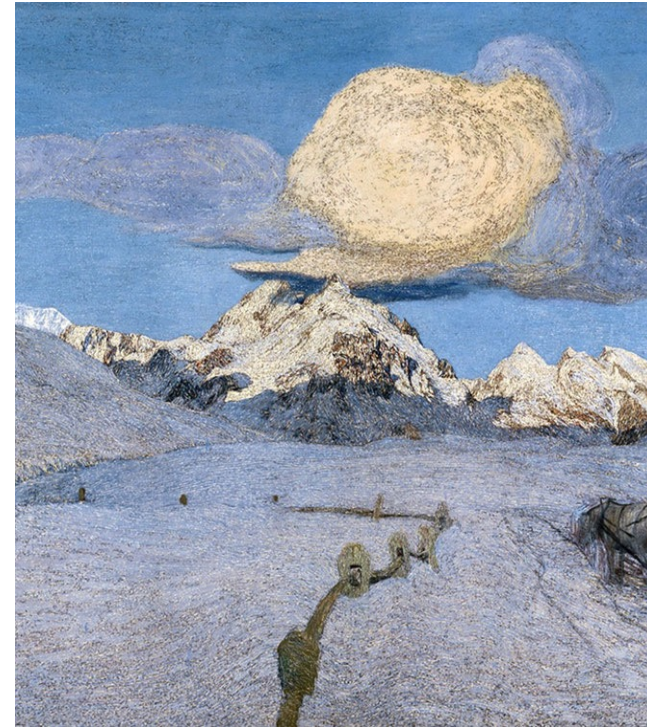
Listening to a sequence of sounds is more primitive in our consciousness than listening to a sequence of words.

Astonishingly enough, singing a well known song by heart is more primitive than speaking, in spite of the fact that the song contains words. Consequently, it is the same concerning an important part of music. Much deeper than, and prior to the speech level, the sound level therefore cannot be expressed in words.

Music and Meaning, 2005, Igor Reznikoff



Bodies are made up of molecules
but people are made up of stories.
Soundscapes come before
wordscapes for telling their stories.



La cura

The care

*I'll protect you from the fears of hypochondria,
From the disturbances that starting from today you'll
encounter on your way.
From all the injustices and deceptions of your time,
From the failures that your nature will attract.
I'll relieve you from the pains and from your mood swings,
From the obsessions of your delusions.
I'll overcome the gravitational currents,
The space and the light,
In order to not to let you grow old.
And I'll heal you from all the diseases,
Because you're a special being,
And I will take care of you...*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmE7nrfzcCo>



Franco Battiato, passed away, May 18, 2021...

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