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# The Field Keeps Breaking into My Home

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## Doing Ethnomusicology During Covid-19 Lockdown

In 2003, when I embarked on my fieldwork in Tehran, I had to arrange my visa and airplane ticket, contact people well in advance and arrange my stay accurately before going there. I also had to decide the things I needed to buy for my fieldwork—a video camera, still image camera, minidisc and microphone, laptop, Persian language grammar books, scarves and other suitable clothing for Iran.



*Figure 1. Minidisc and microphone I bought in 2003 before embarking on my fieldwork in Iran, with a Greek user manual that has turned yellow over time.*

Living today in Athens, Greece, and having conducted fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia and Ireland as well, I feel for the first time that it is not me who decides when or where to visit the field. And not just because of the coronavirus and the lockdown that prevents us from carrying out “conventional” ethnographic fieldwork “somewhere else”. Rather, doing fieldwork at home, for me, has become unavoidable.

It feels as though the field is choosing me. I am being chosen because of my past and current music experiences, and because of the thing I possess (the piano) and the history inscribed upon it.

Being a performer, the coronavirus restrictions imposed on music rehearsals provided me with a first-hand practical experience of the anxieties and uncertainties that musicians face. Soon my identities as ethnomusicologist and researcher were triggered and activated as well. I began applying music auto-ethnography at home—reflexive, sentient, emotional, evocative and experiential. I felt this was again a natural outcome rather than a choice. It was an unavoidable research option, fluid, evolving, sonic, like the field itself.

The field can smell out my research interests and, like a smell that penetrates easily everywhere, it breaks into my home. I cannot shut the front door; the field, as if it were an overwhelming smell, saturates my life and imposes itself on me, becoming an intrinsic part of my everyday life, nuancing every aspect of my music world.

With the pandemic, the lockdown and the quarantine, “fieldwork at home” became literally at home in the house where I live. Nevertheless, the notion of the field at home remains slippery, as the line between what is private and public is not always clear. The field, the pandemic and government measures, suddenly and unexpectedly intruded upon my life and my home, stirring every aspect of my daily music endeavours, merging public and private. “The home cut off from the public is a delusion”, states Tuva Beyer Broch (2020: 231). She goes on, observing that “the state controls the opening and closing of our doors” and takes up residence in our living rooms as the national and global news are pouring into our houses (ibid: 231). Similarly, the pandemic field, following state measures, forcefully entered my life by abruptly interrupting my musical activities with the Intercultural Orchestra. Our group music rehearsals and activities became mediated and castrated by online music educational sessions. The public and private merged once again.

Paradoxically, while I am isolated at home, my home becomes a public place too. In a strange exercise of voyeurism, the public becomes private and the private becomes public. My daughter’s voice, her grandfather’s voice and the street sounds, enveloped in my voice, are all pouring out of the zoom platform and reaching my students’ ears. My library, my Christmas tree, my books and my musical instruments are now visible to many new pairs of eyes.

My musical activities are not happening any more out there, but here at home, where I eat, shower and sleep every day. Music-making became an indoor activity, reminding me of how music-making in Iran in the 1980s, during harsh restrictions, was largely confined to being an

educational and indoor activity (*darvāri* as Iranian musicians say), rather than performative and public (During 1984).

In another article, or in the classroom, perhaps, it would be interesting to compare the differences and similarities of this indoor music-making between then and there and here and now. But now, in the pandemic, the field site is not just one. There are many field sites and various convoluted, fragmentary field works: each marked by a distinct sonic identity, each having its own music and sonic background that at some point may merge and dissolve again, each demanding my attention, each having its place in my home.

These field works are different from my previous ones. For instance, there is no pre-fieldwork preparation, no pre-planned choice of locality or subject matter, no research planning. There is no entry into or exit from the field. It is no longer research “out there”, somewhere far away, where I have to travel to reach out. It is the field leading my research, showing me where to search, whom to contact, what to do.

Writing these thoughts, I am even more confused by the distinction between “home” and the “field”. I started to use these words interchangeably and I wonder if there’s something wrong in doing this. Is it because I feel the same familiarity and comfort being in the field and being at home? Is it because they are both related to my identity and my sense of belonging? As noted by some of the other contributions to this instalment, the boundaries between field and home are increasingly confusing, as are those between here and there. There is a parallel continuity, or even overlap, between anthropology at home and home as a physical space. Fieldwork at home goes on literally at home. My home becomes an extension of fieldwork, and my fieldwork is an extension of my home. I am no longer able to draw a line between personal life and fieldwork, between home and the field. I began living fieldwork at home as an inescapable way of being in the world. “We are never really out of the field”, as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997: 35) commented when challenging and reconfiguring the classical idea of “the field”. In this sense, during this pandemic, my home as well as the field, and life itself, is a place of experimentation and rehearsal.

### **The field entering my home: Five sketches**

March 2020. Music-making during the pandemic. An Auto-ethnography of Orchestral Practice.

Locked up at home, not being able to rehearse anymore with the Intercultural Orchestra at the National Opera House, I began keeping fieldnotes. Initially, in the first lockdown, keeping fieldnotes was a way for me to deal with my emotions, anxiety, despair and insecurity. The orchestra started meeting regularly online in April, but not for rehearsals. It is impossible for 25 people to rehearse online and thus our conductor, Harris Lambrakis, suggested we do music lessons instead. He initiated us into the world of jazz; as most of us are playing Greek and Middle Eastern modal music, diving into jazz chords was productive. I keep writing fieldnotes.

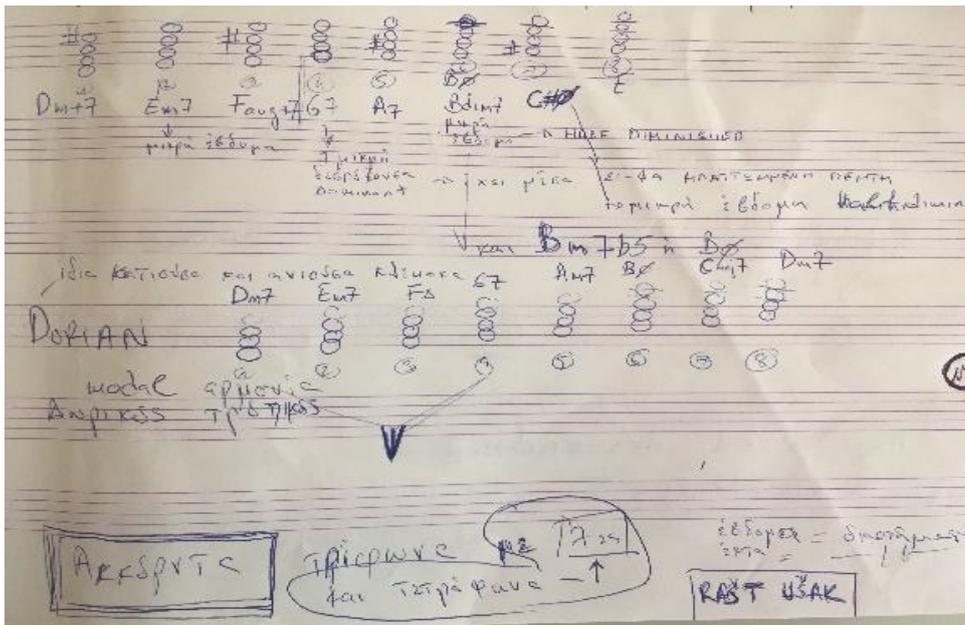


Figure 2. Writing jazz chords during our online music lessons with the Intercultural Orchestra

- April. Spoke with orchestra members about the “Support Art Workers” (SAW) initiative (formed to highlight the precarious working conditions of art workers in Greece).
- Began following SAW online.
- May 7<sup>th</sup>. Joined with other orchestra members the art workers’ protest on Syntagma sq.
- June 22<sup>nd</sup>. Joined the meeting organized by the Panhellenic Music Association with dozen others concerned musicians. Kept notes on scrap paper. Heard the longstanding struggle that musicians have been facing for decades in Greece.
- Realized I was doing fieldwork.
- September. Wrote a paper about how musicians have reacted to government measures during the pandemic (Balandina and Efthymiou 2021)
- December 12<sup>th</sup>. Watched, on FB, a discussion by art workers about the effects of COVID-19 on the performing arts sector.

For two months I have been doing the Covid test every week at the National Opera House, enabling me to attend our weekly rehearsals. Fortunately, my results have always been negative and I was able to attend the recording of a new piece on February 27<sup>th</sup>. In the past few months, sometimes we managed to rehearse and other times we did not, as some members of our orchestra were infected. In the meantime, I keep writing fieldnotes.



Figure 3. Outside the National Opera House, after my last covid test. After so many hours of being locked up at home, it's nice to watch the sky and clouds travelling.

March 2020. Music-making at home during the pandemic: the field of kinship and family. I cannot shut my ears!

**Please see HTML version for accompanying video content**

Video 1. My daughter, with her two cousins, made this song during the first quarantine. I, my cousin, his two children, and my daughter are in the village in quarantine for 5 weeks. The five of us are living in a big house, in nature, without any contacts with other people. The kids decide to make a song about the coronavirus. Aged 7, 10 and 13, they have all been attending music lessons for years in one way or another. For them, making music was unavoidable; for me, living in the same house, it was unavoidable to do participant observation. I attended their daily rehearsals from time to time, each one lasting for several hours: I gave them feedback about the lyrics, the song the video they wanted to make; I tried to cool down the tension between them when they were stressed because of disagreements regarding the song and the rehearsals; I recorded their final video and uploaded it to YouTube.

Some months later, in an article about the after-effects of the pandemic on music practices, I was able to theorize this experience of doing participant observation in children's music-making within the family, at home, and show how the lockdown period enables children's creative music practices in home environments (Balandina 2021).

May 2020. Hearing the domination of the urban soundscape in Athens during the lockdown. I put my fieldnotes aside. I hear noises coming from the street. I go out on my balcony and see people clapping on theirs. As in other cities around the world, Athenians occupied their urban soundscape and employed sound acts by applauding from their balconies to thank health personnel. I joined them. This was a bottom-up act, that soon the government wanted to get credit for by politicizing it.

As an ethnomusicologist and concerned citizen, I soon began researching and writing about it (Balandina 2021). In what ways was the pandemic soundscape being manipulated by governments and other stakeholders to, for instance, promote their agendas or direct public opinion? How did the urban soundscape mirror the relationship between power, control, space and music and highlight concerns about the coronavirus? What did other concerned citizens believe about government interventions in the public soundscape because of Covid-19? How did mass, and social, media depict all these discourses taking place in the national and international soundscape?

May 2020. Made in USSR, Kaluga. Unfolding the story of my family piano (research blossoms inside my home).

Being able to save money during the lockdown, I invited the piano technician, Vasilis Papanikolaou, to tune my piano once again. Vasilis opened the piano and the piano sang. “Made in USSR, Kaluga” was written on the diapason symbol inside the piano.

I have owned this piano for exactly 44 years and it had kept silent all this time. Although I knew its biography, it unfolds its story only now, during the pandemic.



*Figure 4: Pictures of the diapason and Vasilis tuning the piano.*



*Figure 5: Picture of the furniture at my parents' home (with Russian matryoshka doll inside on the left) that my parents bought in 1977 when they sold the second Soviet piano*

And this is how the story unfolded. Struck by the “Made in USSR, Kaluga”, the ethnomusicologist/ethnographer inside me woke up.

- step one I immediately searched online for books about Soviet pianos (in Russian and English)
- step two called my mom, asked her to narrate again the story of my piano, and its sibling piano, which was sold for a piece of furniture we still have
- step three called my aunts, asked them to narrate their experiences with the Soviet pianos they brought and re-sold in Greece
- step four wrote a short passage about the story of the piano on Instagram (in English) and FB (in Greek)
- step five discussed with Vasilis about his experience as a piano technician with Soviet pianos in Greece
- step six shared the history of the Soviet piano with friends who have similar experiences or who were just interested in my story
- step seven thought about future research steps. first and foremost, I have to interview my mom and my father.
- step eight submitted in February 2021 an abstract proposal to the Annual Meeting of the Society of Ethnomusicology

Here, the abstract:

#### Made in the USSR, Kaluga: The Journeys of the Soviet Pianos in the 1970s and 80s with the Repatriation of Greek Refugees

This is a story about my piano, made in the USSR, Kaluga, that embodies the story of hundreds of pianos that exited the Soviet Union brought by repatriating Greek refugees in the 1970s and 80s. This is a story about a musical instrument which was used as currency. Like many Greek refugees, my mother left the USSR to repatriate in her homeland of Greece. She bought two pianos in order to re-sell them in her permanent setting, since, at the time, it was forbidden to take a large amount of money or gold out of USSR. The piano, once a symbol of culture in the Soviet Union, acquired an important economic exchange value by the repatriated Greek refugees who sold these instruments in order to be able to buy land, furniture or as a down payment on a home. These pianos regained their status as musical instruments by the those who bought them, creating new narratives for these households related to their own lives and histories. How many Soviet pianos are there in Greece today? Probably as many as the Greek families who repatriated in the '70s and '80s, if not double that number. This article will address issues related to the interrelated mobility patterns of humans and pianos and the agency of the “travelling” Soviet piano in a specific sociocultural and political milieu. It also traces the memories of the Greek refugees about the pianos they sold and the current symbolic representations of the pianos they kept.

### August 2020–March 2021. Teaching ethnomusicology online.

In the winter semester, I spoke with my students about the effects of the pandemic on music-making and the performing arts sector. This semester, I teach world music cultures, focusing on the Middle East. I have to remember to discuss the differences and similarities between indoor music-making activities in Greece during the lockdown and those in Iran in the 1980s. Sometimes it is difficult to remember things in this experiment of living ethnography (Feder-Nadoff 2020). It is hard to translate living ethnography into words, and also into music and sound.

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