

## SONOROUS WINDOWS IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

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### ABSTRACT

The ideas developed in this article take as reference not only part of the literature that analyzed the trajectory of some societies in times of pandemic and was produced within the framework of sound studies, but also the audiovisual material and narratives collected during an exploratory research. This research was carried out in the traditional media and on the social networks of the internet and focused on the behavior and reactions of the actors during the quarters of the covid-19 that occurred in 2020 and 2021 in several locations around the globe (with emphasis not only on the context of Brazil and the United States of America, but also on the countries of the European continent). It should be noted that we tried to analyze here the double flow of approximations and distances between the actors that — largely deprived of their dynamics of collective and daily interactions in the cities (due to the sanitary measures of social distance recommended by the authorities during the pandemic) — found, in some sound experiences of solidarity and protest (which echoed in the territories), alternatives for the realization of relevant socio-cultural exchanges. Thus, those actors produced peculiar and relevant alliances and tensions in this context, which make it possible to rethink — especially from the perspective of sound and music studies — not only the socio-political dynamics of the acoustic experiences that were generated in various locations, but also the limits and the porosity of traditional borders between the public and private spheres.

### KEYWORDS

city, communication, culture, pandemic, sonorities

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## JANELAS SONORAS EM TEMPOS DE PANDEMIA

### RESUMO

As reflexões desenvolvidas neste artigo tomam como referência não só parte da literatura especializada que analisou a trajetória de algumas sociedades em tempos de pandemia e foi produzida no quadro dos estudos de som, como também o material audiovisual e narrativas levantadas durante uma pesquisa exploratória realizada na mídia tradicional e nas redes sociais da internet sobre o comportamento e reações dos atores durante as quarentenas da covid-19 que ocorreram em 2020 e 2021 em diversas localidades do globo (com destaque não só para o contexto do Brasil e dos Estados Unidos da América, como também dos países do continente europeu). Salienta-se que se procurou analisar aqui o duplo fluxo de aproximações e afastamentos entre os atores que — privados em grande medida de sua dinâmica de interações coletivas e cotidianas nas cidades (por conta das medidas sanitárias de distanciamento social

recomendadas pelas autoridades durante a pandemia) — encontraram em algumas experiências sonoras de solidariedade e de protesto (que ecoaram nos territórios) alternativas para a concretização de intercâmbios socioculturais relevantes. Assim, os atores produziram alianças e tensões peculiares e relevantes nesse contexto, as quais possibilitam que se repense — especialmente da perspectiva dos estudos de som e música — não só as dinâmicas sociopolíticas das experiências acústicas que foram geradas em várias localidades, como também os limites e a porosidade das fronteiras tradicionais entre as esferas do público e do privado.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

cidade, comunicação, cultura, pandemia, sonoridades

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#### INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 pandemic caused severe changes in everyday life in cities. In view of the long duration of quarantines and the social distancing measures adopted by different social segments, as it has happened throughout history in similar exceptional situations, the social fabric was shattered with the loss of daily references (Barbosa, 2020). Soundly speaking, it was possible to observe that the emptying of city streets reduced the amount of sound in the environment. In this less intense sound environment, diffuse sonic waves sprang up, which echoed not only calling our attention, but which also mobilized the players cathartically in the territories.

On the one hand, it was possible to observe, for example, several occurrences involving the initiative of players singing, playing, dancing and playing music on the balconies and windows in different cities around the world, which invited local players to participate in sound interactions. On the other hand, windows and balconies have become platforms from which disputes, disagreements and various dissatisfactions have become sonorously voiced, activating even violent behaviors of confined residents<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, it can be said that in this context a set of sound events partially blurred the traditional borders between the public and private spheres, but also temporarily changed the point of access to the private world of the players. In this sense, Rivera (2020) suggests that during the pandemic, especially when the “doors were closed” — interrupting their continuous flows —, windows occupied a bigger role in the live of citizens, inaugurating in a certain way a peculiar architecture and social dynamics that started to gravitate around them.

In this context, windows are (re)configured, therefore, as an element of communication between public and private spaces, processing an intermediate movement between them. The mandatory confinement implied a kind of subversion of the historical overvaluation of individuals (Sennett, 1974/1988), recovering part of the sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Due to an unprecedented political, economic and institutional crisis in Brazil, it was possible to identify, in the research carried out, the recurrent presence of several political manifestations, which gained expression in the form of “pot-banging protests”, in which intense demonstrations emerged against the current management of the federal government. This particular issue will be discussed in detail later in this article.

deprivation that the notion of private imprinted in the philosophy of Ancient Greece (Arendt, 1958/2007). Deprived of their public and political existence in traditional arenas, players found in the windows ways to temporarily externalize their citizenship with collective manifestations, particularly through sound.

During the pandemic, there has been an opportunity to note that processes of sensitization and the construction of relevant socio-cultural connections and temporary policies have been taking place through “more distant face-to-face sound demonstrations”, which build processes of “urban reterritorialization” with some power (Herschmann & Fernandes, 2014, p. 73). In this article, we analyze two trends that, although apparently opposed, indicate a continuity of acoustic expressions of public sound spaces not only as a way to negotiate tensions, expose divergences and practice aesthetic-political actions, but also as a way of *being-with*, even if in a precarious way (even if the players are obliged to keep a certain distance). They constitute interventions that invade spaces far beyond domestic environments. It is important to highlight that these two trends are being understood as integrated to a wide and complex urban sound phenomenon, which generates multiple social interactions and has a great capacity for social mobilization, especially with the management of sound reproduction and production technologies available today.

Thus, the reflections developed in this article take as reference not only part of the specialized literature that analyzed the trajectory of some societies in times of pandemic and the one produced within the scope of sound studies, but also the audiovisual material and narratives raised during an exploratory research carried out in the traditional media and on social media on the internet about the behavior and reactions of players during the covid-19 quarantines that occurred in 2020 and 2021 in several locations around the globe (with emphasis not only on the context of Brazil and the United States, but also of the countries of the European continent). It should be noted that we sought to analyze here the double flow of moving closer and distancing between the players who — largely deprived of their dynamics of collective and daily interactions in the cities (due to the sanitary measures of social distance recommended by the authorities during the pandemic) — found, in some sound experiences of solidarity and protest, that echoed in the territories, alternatives for the realization of relevant socio-cultural exchanges. Thus, the players produced peculiar and relevant alliances and tensions, which allows us to rethink — especially from the perspective of sound and music studies — the limits and porosity of the boundaries between the public and private spheres, particularly in contexts marked by a certain discontinuity of everyday life (which was characterized by more face-to-face dynamics).

## WINDOWS IN CONSONANCE

Social isolation as the main strategy for coping with the long coronavirus pandemic is known to have continuous psychic effects on much of the planet’s population.

Instigated reactions of all kinds, some of them creative and sonorous, mobilizing players to act coordinately in different locations of the globe. They organized collective presentations — held on windows and balconies — that loudly invaded the ambience of the public space. It can be said that these sound manifestations were an attempt to change the mood of players in the places where they occurred<sup>2</sup>. Thus, in addition to the millions of people that were infected, hospitalized or killed, one of the difficult aspects to manage in the quarantines was precisely the need to face social distancing, in a painful and restricted routine. Several ongoing studies have indicated an exponential growth in cases of depression and anxiety crisis in different regions of the planet: in this sense, some experts highlight that the covid-19 pandemic is curiously generating as a side effect several other pandemics, which are affecting humanity today (Lima, 2020). In this first part of the article, we would like to point out that the “solidarity pandemic” was one of the rare positive externalities of the coronavirus epidemic<sup>3</sup>.

The fact is that, if the *noises* characterize the social activity of different times (Attali, 1977/1995), the context of this pandemic has more clearly demonstrated that the modern and especially the contemporary individual built and sedimented a very noisy culture, on which they are deeply dependent (although they sometimes manifest their discomfort and discontent with this acoustic ambience). In other words, it is worth emphasizing that in the context of this pandemic, the players are discovering that they also have difficulty in dealing with less noise in their daily lives. If, on the one hand, they started to live in a much more silent “soundscape” (Schafer, 1969) that produced ecological effects on the planet (there are several reports about the increased ability to listen to the sounds of animals and nature, even in cities); on the other hand, it must also be recognized that this apparent “peace” has not always produced necessarily positive impacts on the individuals’ psyche, especially when there was a virus of high lethality lurking around the players<sup>4</sup>.

In fact, what is noticeable is that the sound experience in cities is lived ambiguously. In many of the speeches collected during the pandemic, it was found that the players claimed to miss the sounds that regularly leaked — in a “schizophonic” way<sup>5</sup> — around the city. As a matter of fact, they even stressed that they resented the missing “muzak”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Some of these initiatives are brought together in the following video that was compiled throughout this exploratory research, done also on the web <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7eEzepTRvY>.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the temporary denaturalization of some neoliberal postulates could also be mentioned (Piketty, 2013/2014).

<sup>4</sup> Evidently, Schafer’s (1969) arguments about the relevance of “sound ecology” and the harmful effects of its imbalance on populations could be reconsidered. Although we agree with this author on some of his more general assumptions, it is also necessary to recognize that a “more muted environment” can sadden and even make sick expressive social segments, especially in territories in which players are accustomed to inhabiting noisy environments, marked by intense sound palimpsests.

<sup>5</sup> Urban daily life in general is characterized by sound palimpsests: there is often an inability of the players to identify the sources that promote a given plural and fragmentary sound experience that leaks through a given location (Obici, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> The notion of “muzak” is treated here in the sense attributed by Schafer (1969), that is, as a synonym for sounds and songs that integrate an ambience: as a result of everyday acoustic experiences, which generally make up the soundscape of cities.

in their daily lives, about which they used to complain so much before, but to which they were completely accustomed. In several statements published on social networks, the players that took part in the study highlighted that, if on the one hand such sounds harassed them, on the other hand they made it possible for them to feel as part of a pulsating collectivity<sup>7</sup>.

Another aspect that stood out during the research carried out was the fact that music, more than ever, was regularly triggered by the players as a powerful “technology of the self” (DeNora, 2000, pp. 12–13), as a strategy for managing moods in times of pandemic. In other words, music was touted not only as a form of self-care, but also as a way to change — even if only temporarily — the state of consternation and sadness. Therefore, it was used “astutely and tactically” (Certeau, 1980/1994, p. 77–78), as a way to reconnect precariously with some people, seeking to reintegrate the “social fabric” to some extent, which in a way was collapsed by long periods of quarantine<sup>8</sup>.

For many players, the experience of distancing or social isolation at that time was referred to as fear and loss. Just to have a notion: throughout our research it was possible to verify that in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Germany, in “times of lockdown”, the watchword was “resist”, trying to maintain in some way, even if in a tenuous way, the ties with the surroundings. It is not by chance that a composition which was frequently reproduced in these “manifestations of the balconies” was the 19th-century working class song entitled *Bella Ciao*, which for obvious reasons became a sort of hymn of this “re-existence” of individuals in isolation. This occurred not only because of what this song evoked in the collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950/2013) of several European societies, but also because of the recent success of the series *Money Heist* (which was aired on the Netflix platform). In Brazil, these concerts did not occur as often as in Europe, but one can mention as an example the “balcony shows” — from their buildings in the south zone of Rio de Janeiro — by very popular singers nationwide, such as Mumuzinho, Alok and Lulu Santos. These singers mobilized their respective neighborhoods and were filmed their performances broadcasted with great repercussion on social networks (Família Martinez; 2020, *Stories do samba*, 2020) and even on open television channels.

Indeed, it was clear that the songs that echoed in these sound manifestations are in general those that are well known by the local population — a kind of basic mnemonic repertoire of the community is triggered —, because in general the effect that is sought to produce in the neighborhood is a dynamic as participatory as possible: be it playing an instrument, singing along or even dancing with the musicians in the sonorous windows.

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<sup>7</sup> On the urban noise that bothers urban dwellers and their “compensation” strategies, Sterne (2012) makes some considerations in his book on the use of MP3 technology: in it the author points out that we live in noisy environments and that sound technologies, especially those associated with file compression processes (associated with headphones) were important tools, which have been providing better conditions and comfort for a satisfactory enjoyment of the sound consumption experience in cities.

<sup>8</sup> Among historians, Delumeau (1978/2009), in his well-known book on the *História do Medo no Ocidente (History of Fear in the West)*, stresses that this often occurs in long epidemics, such as: the black death in Europe during the middle ages, the Spanish flu in Latin America, in the early 20th century; and even during the ebola virus cycle in Africa, which began in the 1990s.

Thus, the tactic of producing a condition of “musical asylum” against stress or “bubble” — as DeNora (2016) and Bull (2015) respectively point out — can constitute an interesting survival strategy, which would allow players to distance themselves a little, for example, from the avalanche of tragic or dystopian news that emerges on social networks and the media in general. However, the proposal in these collective and cathartic musical initiatives goes in another direction: through them, we seek to promote reconnection with the other and surroundings, seeking to change the psyche and the state of mind not only of those directly involved in the initiative, but also of those from the neighborhood that will consume these musical performances<sup>9</sup> and sonorities.

Therefore, we highlight here not only the pleasure of social reconnection in this very peculiar and very delicate context, but also the political dimension of these mobilizing initiatives. In this sense, Obici (2008) argues in a well-founded way that the music that echoes in urban spaces — voluntarily or involuntarily — ends up also promoting “sound policies”, as they generate powerful collective experiences that can gain multiple senses and meanings, some even with contradictory signs.

Another aspect of these collective sound manifestations in times of pandemic could be highlighted: the capacity of these sounds and music to resignify urban spaces and imaginary<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, still taking as reference these more or less organized collective sound interventions, we can say the following: on the one hand, some of these musical experiences are received as desirable and capable of producing in the players a momentary state of mind, a collective spirit and even excitement; on the other hand, contradictorily (and often at the same time), they generated nostalgia and a certain anguish in those involved (because it made them remember what their daily lives were like before the pandemic). It is also worth remembering that fear was amplified by the media in this context of isolation. Thus, during this global health crisis, the feeling that the players had was that, more than ever, the narratives and sounds broadcast in the mainstream media and social networks in general have daily updated an imaginary of uncertainty and insecurity, reiterating the feeling of living in the “city of fear”, in which the other represents an enormous risk in everyday life. At the same time, albeit in a punctual manner, the organization of these sound initiatives with the neighbors also sensitized and mobilized the players, giving new meaning to the spaces, generating playful collective experiences that built “sonic-musical territorialities” (Herschmann & Fernandes, 2014, p. 13), which promoted, albeit precariously, the reintegration of fragments of the social fabric that was weakened by the experiences of consecutive quarantines.

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<sup>9</sup> Evidently, the players’ performance at the windows (which got bigger in the pandemic) was significant and relevant, as many of these mobilized the neighborhood. The performances were not analyzed in depth, but the “performative theatricality” (Zumthor, 2007) was taken into account to understand the consonances and dissonances that took place in this context.

<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Labelle (2010) and numerous authors of sound studies have sought in their studies to highlight the potential of acoustic experiences, their ability to shape “territories”, the senses, perceptions and rhythms of urban daily life.

## WINDOWS IN DISSONANCE

If, on the one hand, the sound leak from windows and balconies has an enormous potential to produce adhesions among individuals distanced by the pandemic, on the other hand some of these leaks ended up increasing tensions and social conflicts. Several publications have pointed to the long journey of disagreements around the sounds of cities, since at least the 19th century (Attali, 1977/1995). The sounds of the neighbourhood or even the noise of the streets, traffic and the constant movement of crowded people often interpreted as elements of disturbance in the cities, producing dissatisfactions, confrontations and mobilizations of the state are minimizing the leak of sounds *across* and *to* residences.

In an interesting study on the sound conflicts in the middle of the 19th century, Picker (2003) notes that the increase in the sound of cities produced strong reactions from intellectuals and artists whose intellectual work was tainted by the invasive sounds of the streets. In fact, in 1864, British MP Michael T. Bass was one of the first politicians who proposed an urban law with the aim of preserving the peace and tranquility of London's middle-class homes from the noisy activities of preachers, wagons, barrel organs and street musicians (Bass, 1864). On that occasion, this MP received several letters of support, published in the same year in the book *Street Music in the Metropolis*, with testimonies from residents of regions with medium purchasing power, intellectuals and the sick who say they were victims of the "torture" of the unbearable sounds of streets (Bass, 1864, p. 13). The debate involving this MP and some citizens makes it very evident that the sound annoyances that crossed the speeches of the 19th century are frequently related to social asymmetries. The letters addressed to Bass often mentioned immigrants and unemployed people who freely move around the city, harassing other people's peace. The bill and the clamor of such citizens is for the application of regulations that would allow a vigorous action by the police apparatus in the city. However, this asymmetry does not always seem so absolute as in a case reported in this book, in which it is mentioned that a German band was removed from the street by police officers after the complaint of a resident. Interestingly, in another moment, this same resident received these artists on the balcony of his house where they played "for two more hours" (Bass, 1864, p. 17). This maneuver operated by a member of the neighbor demonstrates that the application of interdictions and sanctions has social limits related to power relations (Trotta, 2020). The discussion is not restricted to the universe of European countries, a similar movement takes shape on the other side of the Atlantic. Bioletto (2018) points out a series of regulations at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century that aimed to discipline the urban acoustic space in Mexico City, criminalizing certain musical repertoires and sound practices not consistent with certain civilizing ideals. So, fines and arrests were carried out by urban inspectors to curb noise and behavior deemed inappropriate. In this sense, Bioletto (2018) makes the following comment:

as the records illustrate, it was the subjective appreciation of the inspectors that served to determine when people's manifestations had exceeded the

limits of the sonorously acceptable, although this often also implied considering what they considered inadmissible in aesthetic, bodily and moral terms. (p. 164)

What we seek to show through these examples is that such sound disagreements are crossed by the players' interests and social positions: it is from these perspectives that sound leaks are generally evaluated and sentenced. From the early 20th century, the problem of leaks has been amplified with the increasing popularization of sound reproduction devices, which have gradually become part of the sound of homes. Bijstervelt (2008) points out that, at that moment, the governments of several cities in Europe have mobilized to seek legislation capable of reducing the "problem of neighbors". Problems that, according to this author, come up against the unstable ethical limit that advocated to individuals their right to peacefulness in privacy, in an articulation that combines intimacy and property guaranteed by the legal code that generally governs liberal states. Again, in these conflicts the issue of privacy versus publicity operates as an important element of sound negotiations, being a vector for questions and, often, tensions.

When reflecting on sound intrusions in homes, Dominguez Ruiz (2015) develops the notion of "acoustic intimacy", defined as "a sense of security experienced in a space free from sound intrusions" (p. 119). This sensation is capable of producing a kind of connection with the intimate, conquered by the control of the acoustic conditions of the environment, especially in the domestic sphere. It is worth emphasizing at this point that listening to forced invasive sounds, conversely, produces direct contact with the other. It is understood here as a manifestation of power and, therefore, as a violent act, "which forces us to listen to what we do not want, and whose disturbing capacity brings serious costs to the public health of cities" (Dominguez Ruiz, 2015, p. 129).

In fact, this intrusive and violent aspect appears clearly in the sound conflicts processed during social confinement in Brazil. In a context of intense political polarization, permeated by the belligerent and denialist attitude of the Bolsonaro government, the covid-19 pandemic has been experienced as an event characterized by political tensions and divergences. Impacted by contradictory statements and positions from different spheres of power (municipal, state and federal), players from different locations have converted their confinement spaces into fields of political and ideological struggle. To the sensations of impossibility and restriction typical of the moment, there is a feeling of revolt at the ethically aggressive attitudes and declarations pronounced by the top of that government. As a result, sound protests started to be (re)produced on windows and balconies, especially through shouting and pot-banging, which have been constituting a way for the population to externalize their disapproval of the policies that have been adopted in the country.

Especially the sound of the pans — due to their projection capacity, degree of stridency and frequency — became, in the first weeks of the pandemic, a daily sound accompaniment of large Brazilian cities. Amplified by news coverage in a national chain (which



dedicated long minutes to display records of pot-banging protests in various cities made from windows with cell phones), such sonorities produced by expressive segments of Brazilian society showed enormous dissatisfaction and dismay at the “intense crises” — in the political, economic, social, ecological and institutional spheres — that the Bolsonaro government had been making a significant contribution to “routinize” throughout his mandate. In the impossibility of carrying out some kind of political manifestation from the occupations of urban territories, portions of the population of cities produced the sounds in the windows, seeking to announce dissensions and tensions in this precarious public arena. It is worth mentioning that such astute tactics of expression had already been used in the recent history of the country, with intense protests against the corruption and public policies implemented by President Rousseff during 2015 and 2016.

At both times, pot-banging protests also faced the responses of admirers of these respective politicians (and their governments), who intended, through slogans and shouts (and, eventually, even through the agency of music), to express a favorable position to the instituted powers. Both in 2015 and in 2020 — in a kind of sound continuum — the windows constituted a *loci* for externalization of support and dissatisfaction, as relatively safe and private spaces for the expression of opinions and public confrontations, publicized and supported by the strident sound of percussion of aluminum and stainless steel.

It is evident that sound is inherent to practically all political protests: accompanied by slogans, choruses and varied sounds, traditional urban manifestations are almost always also sound occupations, as can be easily seen. Recently, with the wave of political polarizations in different parts of the planet, sound and music have been (re)managed by the players as active elements in street protests. Mention could be made of the anti-racist mobilization triggered by the brutal assassination of George Floyd in the United States (Scott, 2020) or the repeated mobilizations against the continuation of political repression and the neoliberal and dictatorial profile in contemporary Chile (Spencer Espinosa, 2020). There are countless cases and it is not difficult to locate a robust literature that correlates sound and music with political demonstrations and protests, in different latitudes and in different historical periods.

However, what we seek to highlight here is that the vibrational body of such protests of 2020 — carried out with some distance —, are complemented and interact with the online occupation (in various web networks and platform) and the physics of bodies, posters, sound cars, and, in general, with a set of resources used in protest marches and political demonstrations. We emphasize here the physical materiality of human groupings engaged around an idea that is added, reprocessed and intensified by the acoustic strength of the sound produced by this agglomerated mass. No wonder. The greater the number of people, the greater the symbolic relevance and political effectiveness of the protests, which go hand in hand with the increase in the vibratory energy and the sound volume of such events. In the set of sound events that are being discussed in this article,

physical materiality dissipates, making it impossible to appear as a political presence. In this sense, the sonic and vibrational materiality of the clash between neighbors confined in their residences in Brazil acquires relevance and enables the construction of a specific “ambience” (Thibaud, 2015), characterized by an intense drama. Unlike the other cases of occupation and sound and political confrontations, the protests from the windows in times of pandemic are fundamentally acoustic occurrences, which highlight the socio-political power of sounds and music as elements that significantly underpin various human interactions.

### **SONORITIES IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC**

As it was possible to attest here, the metaphors of “consonance” and “dissonance” can be useful to underline that the movements of sound approaches and departures are not exclusive, often occurring concurrently in a locality. In this sense, the technical meaning of such terms in the musical vocabulary points to a continuous play of coincident and divergent vibrations that characterize what is understood to be a musical language.

It is worth noting that the superposition of sound waves peaks reinforcing certain harmonics (consonance) and the beats of nearby peaks that cancel each other out and enter into dispute (dissonance) are movements that regularly cross the varied musical practices across the globe. The dimensions of the noises (sounds of undetermined height or distorted by their volume) and amplitude of the waves (volume) — as aspects of sound reverberation in physical spaces and their tone, rhythmic and harmonic characteristics — provide a complexity that makes it difficult or simplistic to classify any sonic experience as “consonant” or “dissonant”. Therefore, seeking to advance beyond this metaphor, the following idea is proposed: the subjective triggers of interpretations on the pertinence and even the ideological meanings and modulations of sound and music form a tangle of flows, which populate the private sensory experience lived by players in cities, especially in times of pandemic.

These reflections are concluded by recognizing that an exhaustive assessment of the acoustic and social phenomenon of the experience of sounded during the covid-19 pandemic was not carried out here. As previously mentioned, what we sought to analyze in this article was the double flow of coming closer and distancing that took place between the players (who were temporarily deprived of their collective existence in the cities) and which was mediated in a certain way by the sound experience. In this context of a less noisy crisis, sounds and music acquire more weight and presence, affecting the players ways of being and living collectively more intensely. In view of the impossibility of building a public sound space in a more conventional way, the city dwellers were forced to establish socio-communicative links with their surroundings through sounds emitted especially from their respective homes.

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