

## A virtual ICMC

By Tomás Koljatic S.

I was absolutely thrilled when, during 2019, Rodrigo Cádiz suggested that the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (the institution where we both work in Santiago) should host the ICMC 2020. Antonio Carvallo and I jointly accepted his invitation to join the team (as Co-chairs of the music track) and assist him in the organization of the conference. Up to 2018 I had been in charge of an international contemporary music festival hosted in Chile, and, as a composer, I had some background in music technology, so I was thankful and delighted to have an opportunity to put my experience to a good cause. The unforeseeable global COVID-19 pandemic, the ensuing stay-at-home orders, and restrictions on international travel, prevented the ICMC from taking place in 2020. When it finally did take place, in July 2021, it was a conference quite unlike the one we had originally imagined. Just like the rest of the world had to readjust to a new reality, so did this conference, and, after consulting with the ICMA, the decision was taken to completely stream the

event through the internet.

Of course, the change in format entailed some inescapable drawbacks for the organizing committee. For one thing, we could not showcase our country's culture, our hospitality, and the formidable landscape of the Andes mountains which towers over Santiago. Participants missed the opportunity to explore our beautiful university campus, formerly a convent built in the early 20th century in an impressive Neo-Romanesque style. We could not enjoy the natural acoustics of the large church, where concerts are frequently held, and we were not able to host the event at the Centro de Extensión Oriente, a brand new convention center with a concert hall seating some 250 spectators, and equipped with a state-of-the-art audio system. The ICMC 2020 would have been the first large-scale event hosted in the venue! Most regrettably, we lost the opportunity to meet and socialize in-person, and to share, unhindered by computer screens, our spontaneous reactions to the concerts, presentations, panels, installations and workshops.

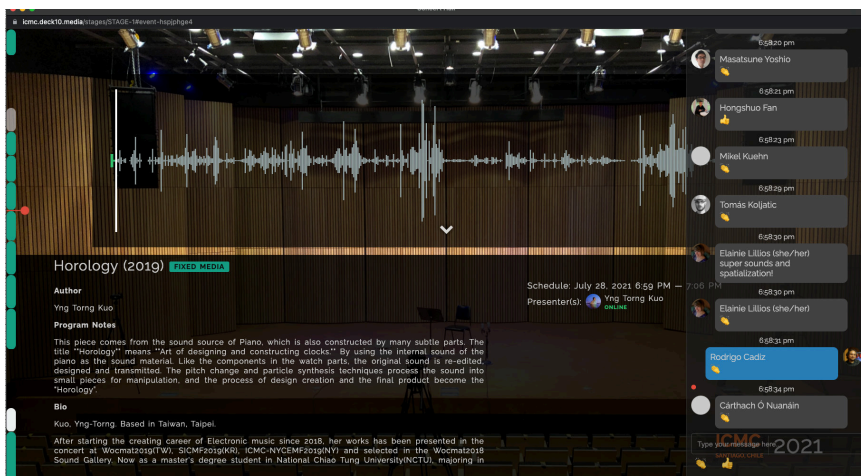


Figure 2. Screenshot from a concert in Deck 10 during ICMC2021.

COVID-19 cases in Santiago spiked dramatically in the months leading up to the conference. As a consequence, strict lockdown orders were put in place by national health officials, which meant that we were unable to access the premises of our university for several months. This created a new level of challenge as we could not produce ourselves new recordings of all the works for instruments and electronics selected for performance at ICMC. Thus, we had to rely mostly on recordings provided by the composers themselves, which resulted

in only a handful of local instrumentalists being able to collaborate in the event.

In addition, the audiovisual works presented at the conference had to be streamed through the internet, which entailed mixing them down to stereo (in the case of multichannel pieces), and compressing the audio and video. It also meant that the quality of the listening and viewing experience was restricted by the quality of the equipment available to each member of the audience (which could range from low-cost

earbuds or laptop speakers to professional audio systems, and from smartphone screens to high-definition projectors) and the acoustic and visual conditions of the room where the conference was streamed from. Similarly, installations (which are meant to be experienced directly, firsthand, in a particular space and time) had to be canned and played back. As a result, I am sure that many, if not all, artists featured at ICMC would agree that their works would have been better served had the conference been held in-person. For better or for worse, quantitatively speaking, today most art is experienced (or more aptly stated, "consumed") through internet services such as YouTube, Spotify, or Netflix. Arguably, many works presented at ICMC 2021 seemed to embrace these rather restrictive formats compatible with streaming platforms and thrive in them.

The technology provided by Deck 10 made ICMC 2021 possible. The company offered a first-class solution for hosting the conference online: a platform with a slick web design that integrates, among other resources, audio and video stream-

ing, and social networking capabilities. Most of the activities were pre recorded (and well rehearsed!), and uploaded to the platform in advance. The events could be watched both in real-time as well as on-demand, which was very handy for participants in different time zones.

For this instance, holding a virtual conference was, evidently, an emergency solution prompted by the global pandemic. I am no futurologist, but I believe that most forthcoming summits, academic conferences, trade shows and other such events will include both online and in-person activities. Video conferencing can be a very valuable tool to permit the participation of those unable to travel long distances. In the coming years, remote participation will be even more common, although I see it as highly improbable that, in the short run, we will eschew international gatherings altogether. Although some things can be done very efficiently through the internet, networking (one of the most important reasons these events exist in the first place) seems much more difficult to carry out effectively through a computer screen. This may gradually change

as technology advances, and as we learn to use and take advantage of it in improving group dynamics.

Despite the unexpected complications, technology and ingenuity allowed the team led by Rodrigo Cádiz to hold a memorable ICMC 2021. Video conferencing and hybrid classrooms have become a staple of the daily routines of most of us in the last few years, and this tendency is likely to keep growing in the future. The forthcoming ICMCs will undoubtedly face (and answer) the question of, "in what manner, and to what extent, to allow for remote participation?". The success of the virtual 2021 ICMC has set an important precedent for future editions.