Challenges of Distance Learning in the Context of Music Studies: the Case of Lithuania

Giedrė Gabnytė Bizevičienė[1], Barbora Bizevičiūtė[2]

[1] *Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Vilnius, Lithuania.* *giedre.gabnyte@lmta.lt*

[2] *Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Vilnius, Lithuania.* *b.bizeviciute@gmail.com*

Abstract: The paper presents some of the data from an empirical study conducted at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants of the study - first and second cycle students of different specialisations (N=135) from the Music faculty of LAMT - revealed their experiences during the global distance learning that replaced contact studies. The chosen object of the study - the challenges of distance learning in terms of students' experience - allowed to explore and summarise the advantages and disadvantages of distance music studies, as well as to assess the students' emotional well-being during COVID – 19 pandemic. The questionnaire survey showed that the absolute majority of the participants experienced a clear predominance of anxiety and stressful situations during distance learning, and that their motivation to learn dropped significantly during the pandemic. The respondents' answers to open-ended questions, analysed by qualitative content analysis, revealed that studying only at a distance distorts the fundamental idea of music studies - to create and learn from a natural and authentic environment. However, according to the participants, distance learning can also have positive aspects if it is used only in group and non-musicianship/non-musical activities, or if it is combined with contact learning.

Keywords: challenges of organising distance music studies; distance learning experiences of LMTA students; emotional well-being of students and lecturers in the conditions of COVID-19 pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world faced enormous economic, social and cultural challenges, forcing societies to adapt to the new conditions of existence, including the academic world, where, according to a UNESCO assessment, as many as 87% of students from more than 160 countries around the world were forced to choose distance learning practices, which allowed them to continue their studies during the quarantine period, without being interrupted [7]. It has been estimated that during the period of 2008-2011, only around 7% of students on average were learning distantly in Europe, which demonstrates rather low popularity and prevalence of this mode of learning.

It has been reported, that before the *COVID-19* pandemic, only 23% of students in Estonia, 16% in Sweden, 10% in England and 8% in Lithuania participated in distant learning [14]. The very rapid global shift to distance education alone has therefore become a huge challenge for students, teachers and educational institutions. Although each region's higher education has its own specific characteristics and has likely dealt with the challenges of the pandemic in its own way, common multidimensional challenges (which can be classified and discussed in terms of social, economic and psychological/mental health aspects) have become evident.The restriction and exclusion of social contacts that resulted from the pandemic period has significantly reduced the ability of students to make effective use of different learning opportunities and environments. Challenges of the rapid digitisation of studies include resistance from university administrations to moving studies to the distance [9], the limited meeting of student expectations when moving from 'live' to distance learning [15], and the need to smartly combine distance and hybrid learning [19].

Looking at the economic dimension of the higher education challenges of the pandemic, it is clear that universities are faced with the need for additional financial resources. The question was: how much has distance education paid off financially? Will universities be able to fund new research after the pandemic, etc. [8]. The economic challenges posed by the pandemic were particularly pronounced in emerging economies, with nascent higher education sectors addressing the challenges of attractiveness of studying for international students, which became particularly acute during the pandemic [12]. Some universities were found to be facing additional and unplanned costs in developing

distance learning programmes, and the need to upgrade or retrain teachers. It has been observed that international mobility of students has decreased during the pandemic period, which has significantly reduced university budgets and the smooth allocation of funds to the required needs. Some universities have been forced to reduce tuition fees at the request of students, causing financial losses for HEIs [11]. It has been observed that students' financial stability has suffered during the pandemic, as they lost the opportunity to work and earn when the pandemic started [6]. The psychological challenges faced by members of the academic community were perhaps the most evident during the global distance learning. Li et al. [10] analysed 27 student mental health surveys and found that a total of 14 mental health problems emerged in these surveys during the pandemic period, with depression (39%) and anxiety (36%) being the most commonly experienced among students. According to Zhang, the origin of the psychological problems experienced by students - anxiety and depression, panic attacks, anger attacks, etc. - can be explained as a response to the socio-economic challenges experienced during the pandemic. However, according to the author, these problems may have been transformed into a secondary post-pandemic crisis, which may have provoked lasting changes in the individual's feelings and behaviour, negatively affecting health and quality of life [26]. This is also supported by the insights of Salimi et al. [24], who found that the stress and anxiety experienced by students during the pandemic may have compromised their ability to succeed in their future studies, to communicate with their peers, and may have had a negative impact on their social well-being and general health. For example, a study, conducted by Petkevičiūtė and Balčiūnaitienė [19], showed that students lacked necessary support, knowledge and skills from their teachers during the pandemic. Furthermore, it was found that students tended to relieve increased stress with psychotropic substances such as alcohol, nicotine and drugs, as well as medication, and this coping strategy was more common among male students [21]. A study by Padron et al. [17] showed that psychological difficulties during the pandemic were more likely to be experienced by Bachelor's than Master's students. Gender was also a significant factor, with female students more likely to be affected. Students are thought to have been psychologically affected by the restriction of social contacts, interpersonal conflicts, uncertain academic prospects, but most of all by changes in the evaluation of teaching and learning outcomes.

In the context of higher education, universities where studies require a lot of individual work, direct contact between teacher and student in the same location, and where sophisticated laboratory equipment or specific equipment is used for studies (arts, healthcare, engineering) stand out. For universities with music degree programmes, the biggest and most difficult challenge during the *COVID-19* pandemic has been the hands-on sessions. It should be noted that the specificity of music studies is determined by the purpose of the music subject/discipline: in music theory subjects, the presentation and absorption of informative content predominates, while in music performance disciplines, the skills of performing and interpreting music are acquired. Obviously, music theory knowledge is more flexible to be delivered remotely, while music performance requires 'live' contact with the instrument(s) and the teacher teaching the student(s), so the online environment fundamentally alters the specificity of the subject, changing the dynamism, expressiveness and authenticity of music performance [23]. As Akyürek, R. [2] argues, it can be argued that the pandemic has caught teachers working in individual contact-based music studies completely unprepared. There was a lack of managerial experience, time management skills and creativity in organising distance learning (ibid.). However, another problem which emerged was the lack of it skills among music educators. This problem prevented them from adapting quickly and smartly to the pandemic conditions, as well as acting efficiently and creatively. [18]. Researchers who have studied the specificities of distance music education have observed that in distance workshops, students find it particularly problematic to understand what the teacher is explaining and what exactly is required in an instrumental or singing lesson, as they are constrained by unstable internet connections, audio and video delays, and other disturbances in distance learning [13]. Obviously, the quality of audio transmission is altered in the case of remote contact between teacher and student, making it difficult for the performer to interpret a piece of music in a clear and compelling way and for the listener to holistically perceive the relationship between the body movements, posture and the emotions of the performance [22]. This is vividly illustrated by a study of guitar teachers' opinions, which revealed that when working with a student remotely, it is possible to observe and solve the problems of performance technique, but it is difficult to assess and improve the musicianship of the performer, the qualities of the sound, and the dynamic nuances of the music being performed [1].

According to the researchers, the pandemic limited the opportunity to practice in ensembles, choirs, orchestras, and perform in concerts, so that students lost the opportunity to interact live, to experience the joy of making music and to communicate with their partners on stage. In some music education institutions, contact lessons in the instrumental

subject and in the various ensemble configurations were not offered at all, but were replaced by recordings of music performances and video conferences for discussion and reflection. In this respect, the theoretical disciplines of music have been less affected, as information technology has made it possible to use a variety of online learning platforms, computer programmes, etc. [4]. However, although it has been shown that students often find it to be a new and interesting experience that helps to diversify and update the learning process, while at the same time helping to develop their creative abilities according to researchers, information technology is not yet being used to its full potential in theoretical music education, [3].

When faced with specific stressors such as isolation, pandemic anxiety, and radically changed learning styles, music students, like other students, have been found to have increased stressful thoughts, negative emotions, and feelings of frustration [21]. An empirical study by Habe et al. [7] suggests that music students were particularly sensitive to the effects of Covid-19: comparing their pandemic experiences with those of sports students, it was found that sports students experienced more positive and less negative effects of the pandemic than prospective music students, although the perceived threat of the pandemic was similar for the two groups of subjects. The authors found that students who recognised that they had the flexibility to adapt and the necessary skills to cope with unexpected challenges were more likely to be able to control the negative effects of their studies than students who had long-term, fixed study goals and who pursued them in a focused and distraction-free manner. Other researchers have observed that when studying in distance education, students in music specialisations often become apathetic, lose enthusiasm and purpose in their studies, become less motivated, and are overwhelmed by apathy and indifference [16]. In order to analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the quality of studies of Lithuanian music students, an empirical study was initiated, **focusing on the experiences of students at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre**. The Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre is the only higher education institution in the country specialising in music, theatre, cinema and dance arts, which trains performing arts professionals. Currently, there are about 1000 students studying at this higher education institution, and about 400 students studying at the Faculty of Music, where the empirical research was carried out. As in many European art schools, the pandemic also led to a reorganisation of the study process at the LAMT, with the introduction of hybrid learning, which was eventually replaced by global distance education, triggering radical changes in the organisation of studies and disruption of learning, artistic practice and personal expression. **The aim of the study was to analyse, reflect and summarise the students' experiences** by means of a questionnaire survey, assuming that the students' preferences, expectations and the expression of their emotional experiences in the future will allow to improve the organisation of the study process and will ensure a good psycho-emotional well-being of all participants of the study process.

2. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

In order to obtain informative and objective results based on the students' experience, an online **questionnaire survey** was organised, which consisted of 14 questions (1 open-ended, 5 semi-closed and 8 closed-ended questions).

The following research questions were raised:

- Which mode of study (contact, hybrid, distance) do students prefer?

- How have students' motivation and emotional well-being changed after the introduction of distance learning?

- Has communication between students and lecturers changed during the pandemic?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning in music subjects?

The questionnaire was designed using a *Likert* scale methodology (a 5 possible statement rating format with a neutral middle category). The survey data were processed using *IBM SPSS* 26 software package. The descriptive statistics method was used, i.e. the analysis of frequencies, and the *Chi-square* criterion was applied to investigate the relationship between the respondents' demographic variables and the personal study experiences. In the processing of the questionnaire data, the respondents' answers to the 6 open-ended questions were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method, which was based on the construction of categories on the basis of the results obtained by comparing the available data elements of the survey with each other, and giving the categories names

that summarise the content of data [5]. The categories were constructed on the basis of the facts, plots, attitudes and motives mentioned by the respondents.

The selection of participants was based on non-probability random sampling. This principle is characterised by the inclusion of the first occurring elements of the population or the most accessible part of the population. Interpreting the results obtained from such a sample does not allow statistical conclusions to be drawn about the population as a whole [25]. Therefore, it can be argued that an unrepresentative survey sample was used in the study of LMTA students. In total, 118 first (Bachelor 87.4%) and 17 second (Master 12.6%) cycle students (N=135) of the Faculty of Music participated in the study, 31.1% of them male, 68.9% female. This gender distribution is not accidental, as female students dominate among the Academy's students. The participants of the study are students of different specialisations. The majority of the participants were piano majors. This demographic indicator is also not a coincidence - the Piano Department is one of the largest at the LAMT. The average age of the students participating in the study was 21 years.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study participants

Specialisation	Number of respondents in percent	Number of female participants	Number of male participants
Choir conducting	2,2%	3	-
Singing	18,5%	23	2
Piano	21,4%	25	4
Percussion instruments	6,7%	-	9
Musicology	7,4%	10	-
Composition	5,9%	6	2
String instruments	15,5%	20	1
Wind instruments	17,3%	3	20
Organ	2,2%	2	1
Accordion	2,9%	1	3
Total	100%	93	42

3. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

It is clear that the pandemic period has had a major impact on the well-being of many people, including, most likely, students who have experienced the daily reality of distance learning. The questionnaire therefore asked students to share how distance learning has affected their emotional well-being. It was revealed that the lack of communication (37.4%), the feeling that no one cares about them (11.8%) and the anxiety, tension and stress (27.2%) were the biggest problems they experienced after switching to distance learning. 11.8% of students felt safer learning by distance learning than by contact learning and only 3.7% of students indicated that the way they learnt did not affect their well-being in any way. Some respondents commented more on the changes in their emotional well-being:

I experience anxiety, tension and stress all the time, but when things are done in a non-contact way, these feelings become emptier and heavier (R3); My studying mood remains the same positive one, with neither anxiety nor sadness, but I would say that distance studying does not count as studying (R49); I feel less stressed and calmer (R102); I feel that I spend my time more productively, I get my work done quicker, so I have more free time (R125); I think I would like to have more psychological support, as everyone else would. Talking about fears, anxiety, panic (R100).

It was hypothesised that if students' emotional well-being changed during the pandemic, their motivation to learn would also change. The results of the study showed that the majority of students' motivation for distance learning decreased during the pandemic, while only 5.9% of the students' motivation increased and 19.3% of the students reported that their motivation for learning remained unchanged. A statistically significant relationship was found between motivation and students' preferences for the type of lectures (group, individual): students who reported a

decrease in motivation during the quarantine period were more likely to find the group lecture format more suitable than the individual format for distance learning (see Table 2). Interestingly, more than 80% of the respondents associated the distance mode as suitable for studying specifically with the type of group lectures, slightly more than 11% said that the distance mode was suitable for both group and individual lectures and only a few percent said that the distance mode was suitable for studying only individual subjects. There is an association between changes in students' motivation and their preferences for learning mode (contact/remote/hybrid). Students whose motivation to learn decreased were more likely to prefer contact mode of learning than those whose motivation remained unchanged or increased (see Table 2). There was also a statistically significant relationship between decreased motivation to learn and anxiety experienced during distance learning: students who reported a decrease in motivation to learn during the pandemic experienced more intense anxiety, tension and stress (ibid.).

Table 2. The relationship between students' motivation to learn and some behavioural factors: results of a *Chi-square* test

Behavioural factor	value	df	Sig(p)
Preferences for group lecture type	20,01	9	0,02
Preferences for contact learning	43,3	9	0,01
Anxiety, tension, stress	18,01	11	0,02

When asked what their preferences would be if they had the option to choose their study method, it was found that more than half of the students (51%) would choose the contact method, 42% would choose the mixed method and only 7% would choose the distance method. Figure 1 shows how students' opinions were divided in the context of different specialisations. It was found that students from the majority of specialisations prefer contact and hybrid learning, while those studying a musicology subject prefer distance learning. Interestingly, none of the composition students chose the contact mode of learning as their preferred mode of learning, indicating that they would choose either the hybrid or distance mode. This result partially confirms the results of previous studies that the contact mode is an indispensable learning condition for the study of music performance disciplines, while the study of music theory subjects can be successfully carried out in distance mode.
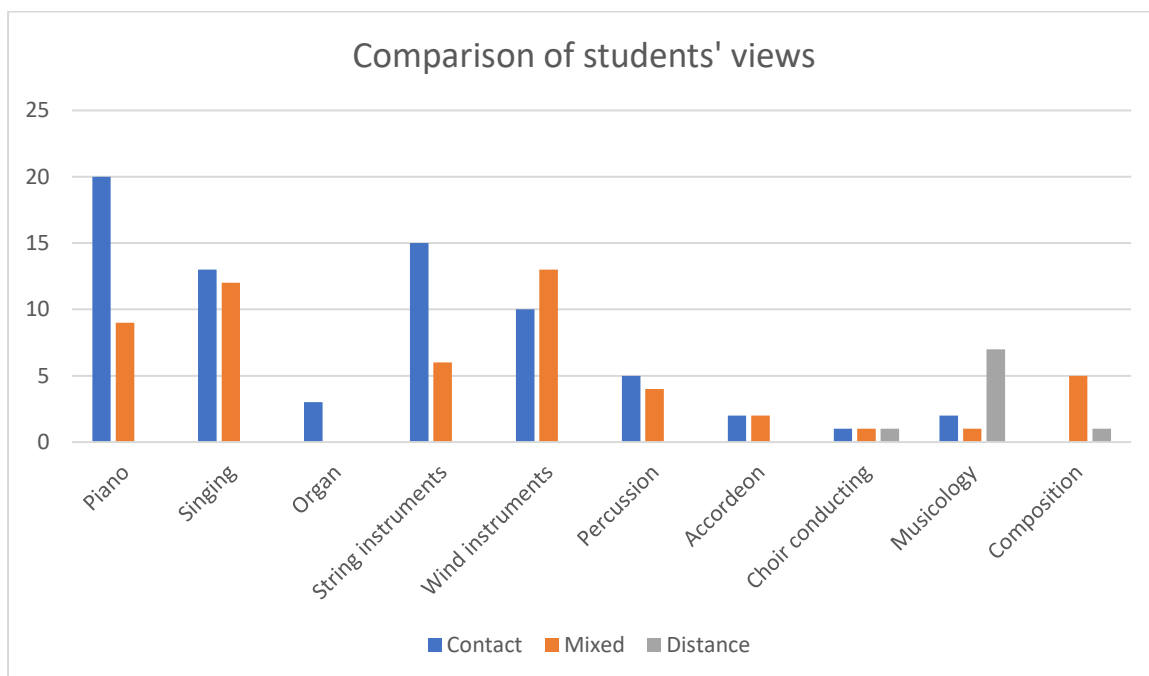

Figure 1. Comparison of students' preferences for learning in the context of different specialisations

The study sought to find out to what extent distance learning changed the relationship between student and lecturer: was there/is there no obvious change in communication and cooperation, was there a need for support from the lecturer to the student, and how successfully/unsuccessfully was this implemented? In assessing these changes, it

emerged that communication had not changed in the opinion of the majority of students (46.7%), but a significant number of students (35.6%) indicated that it had become more formal, while 17.8% of respondents felt that remote communication with lecturers had become more cordial and closer. It was found that students who clearly lacked support from lecturers during the quarantine period experienced a greater decrease in motivation to study during the quarantine period than those who did not ($\chi^2 = 42,7$; df = 12, p <0,01).
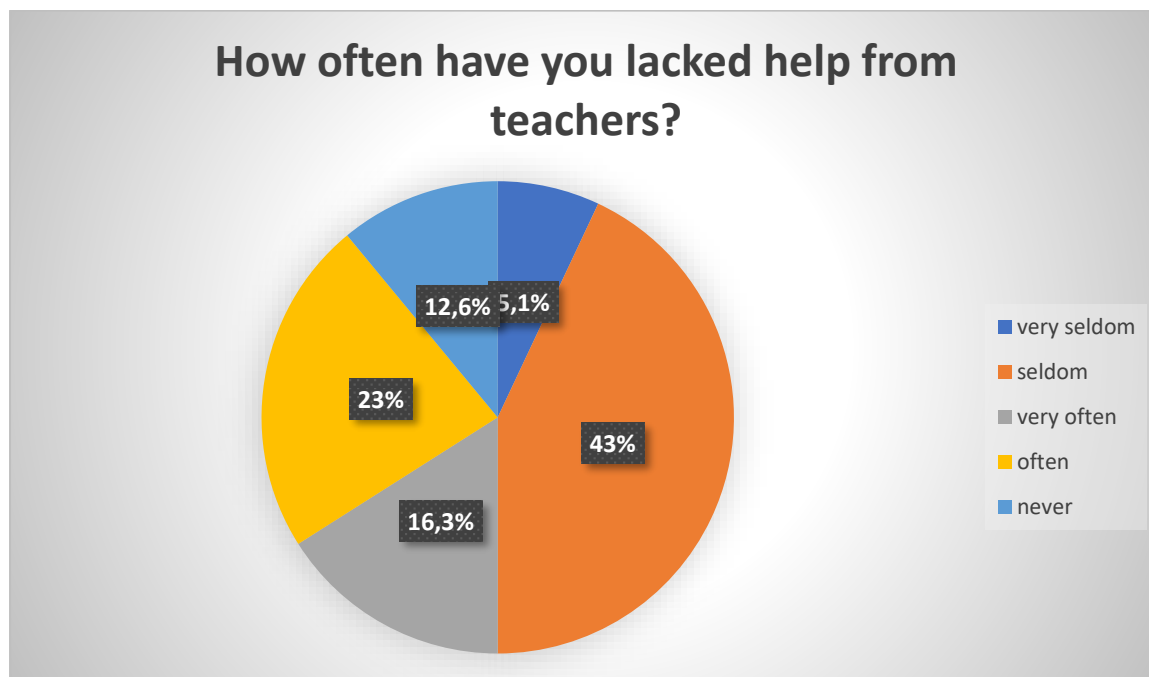

Figure 2. Teachers' support for distance learning during quarantine

In their answers, students commented more on their expectations of communication and cooperation with lecturers if they had to study at a distance again. Two categories emerged from the results: **the need for subject collaboration during lectures** and **the reflection on mutual emotional well-being.** Students mentioned that when studying theoretical subjects at a distance, there is a great need for group work tasks, the lecturer's own involvement in group work, and efforts to establish contact with students and get to know them better. Respondents said that dialogue between the student and the lecturer about the emotional well-being of both of them is very important to them:

It is important to encourage teachers to talk more about students' wellbeing, to care if a student is feeling unwell at times, rather than piling on even more work.... (R109);

I think students should be made aware of the psychological state of teachers, who are exactly the same people, going through the same problems as students. Sometimes students seem to forget that teachers also need to rest or maybe even motivate themselves to work in such conditions (R41).

Students were asked to identify the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. The most important advantages of distance learning were the ability to study at a time convenient for them (24.6%) and the ability to sleep longer in the morning (21.8%). A significant number of respondents also appreciated the advantages of audio recordings - being able to select and send the best version of the music (16%) and not being stressed during exams by listening to the recordings (14.4%). 11.7% of the respondents noted that it is more comfortable for them to study at home and 6.2% of the students appreciated the reduction of the requirements of the teachers when studying at distance. Respondents also saw more advantages of distance learning: *It is very convenient to participate remotely in group lectures, this could always be the case"(R9); I think that the content of teaching is not at all compromised if the teacher knows how to use the technology and we, the students, are always ready to help (R49);I have saved time travelling to and from the Academy (R17);I can have lunch at home more often and eat warm home - cooked food (R111).* When asked about the disadvantages of distance learning, students stated that it is not possible to learn everything required during their studies at a distance. As already noted in other studies, distance learning is particularly unsuitable for arts specialisations, where many subjects have to be practiced here and now and require

specific conditions for their realisation. These include ensemble music, orchestral and choir rehearsals, public performances, solo concerts, etc. 83% of respondents noted that distance learning requires significantly more work on one's own, which is one of the drawbacks of distance learning. Interestingly, 13% of respondents were negative about learning from home, as there are many distractions and disruptors to learning. 14.8% of respondents noted that they had encountered technical problems when studying at a distance, such as poor internet connectivity, headphones that do not work, poor video or audio quality, and inability to connect to the right online platform. 17.8% of respondents stated that they did not have the right conditions for studying at a distance and the most important disadvantage was the lack of the necessary equipment to record the performance of a musical work: *The recording does not reflect the essence of the musical performance, and the listener can only assess the accuracy of the musical text but not the musicality or originality of the musical idea (R84).* Some respondents highlighted that distance learning was often hindered by a lack of personal initiative: *Sometimes it is even harder to get out of your own safe bubble, especially to initiate communication or ask for help. It is much easier to passively observe things from the side rather than getting involved (R12).* The format of remote lectures was also criticised: *Too much staring at the screen, complicated and broken lecture formats (R82)*. It was pointed out that it is inconvenient to study when the mode of study is constantly changing: *One month you have to go to the academy, the next month you do not. This is very disruptive to the rhythm of life. It would be better to stay longer and then come back permanently (R89).*

The survey asked students to give suggestions on how to improve the organisation of distance learning. The opinions expressed revealed a very wide range of possibilities for improvement, so the data were grouped into four categories reflecting different issues in the field of study (one quote from each respondent was used to illustrate the content of each category):

- **The need for and balance between distance and face-to-face study**, which students based on the need for a blended mode of study, emphasising that specialised subjects need to be taught face-to-face, while group lectures can also be taught remotely (*I would teach specialised subjects face-to-face and group lectures remotely (R57)*)

- **The need to improve study methods** by making use of the possibility of viewing recorded lectures, including alternative ways of listening to audio recordings (*The quality of audio recordings through Teams or Zoom applications is inexorably distorted, and listening to samples of music or to colleagues' playing is not a pleasure, but an ordeal (R44)*)

- **Improving remote asisgments**, making more effective use of remote performances, concerts *(...remote concerts or something similar should be organised, so that students not only play for themselves or for the exam board, but also have the opportunity to experience the connection between the performer and the audience, even if it is virtual (R21))*

- **Student communication and activity in lectures,** in accordance with the rules and agreements *(It would be good if all students had their cameras on without reservation. It would be much more fun to work and teach, both for the other students and for the lecturer himself." (R106), The need for 'live' simulation of learning. Trying to do things the same way as in contact learning. It is important that distance lectures are delivered with video and audio (R7)).*

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

An empirical study conducted at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre revealed students' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to their psychoemotional well-being, motivation to learn, priorities in choosing a study mode, and evaluation of the relationship between students and lecturers. The survey also revealed students' opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning and offered relevant suggestions for the organisation of distance learning. Although the results of the study cannot be used to assess the population of music students in the whole country (which is a limitation of this study), it can be assumed that a representative sample of students would show similar results. This is due to the partial overlap of the results of this study with the results of other studies and the insights of the authors.

One of the most important insights confirmed by the results of this study coincides with the general opinion of music education researchers that contact work is the only and indispensable learning alternative when studying music

performance-related subjects. It has been shown that studying only at a distance distorts the fundamental idea of music studies - to participate 'live' in the musical process, to create and learn from a natural and authentic environment, to develop professionally and to achieve a complete artistic result. However, students consider that distance and/or hybrid learning has its positive sides and that, having tried it under conditions of force majeure, it can be used intelligently and creatively in a post-pandemic situation. The results of the study showed that distance learning is more suitable for group learning and only for classes where music theory is taught.

The results of the study on the experiences of music students were consistent with other studies on the experiences of students from different specialisations: during the pandemic, students experienced a change in their psycho-emotional well-being - although it was found that for some students distance learning provided a sense of security and calmness, a larger number of students reported a clear predominance of stressful situations. Students reported a clear change in their motivation to learn during the pandemic, with a decrease in motivation leading to an increase in feelings of anxiety and tension. The participants also stressed the importance of communication between students and teachers during a pandemic. It was found that students often lacked subject-specific support from lecturers, as well as psychological support and encouragement. According to the students, support from teachers would have helped them to deal with the psychological problems they were experiencing, and to manage their feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. The majority of students' communication with teachers remained unchanged, but the experiences of some students suggest that communication with teachers has become more formal and cold. Only a few respondents described their communication with teachers as having changed positively. The results suggest that empathy was important for students during the pandemic: there was a lack of mutual reflection between teacher and student on their psycho-emotional well-being, which might have allowed them to understand each other better and to cope with the psychological challenges they faced.

The study has revealed valuable practical information that could be useful if the need for distance learning should arise again in the future. Students not only rated the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, but also mentioned ways to improve distance learning. In their answers, the participants expressed the need for changes in teaching methods and reporting procedures, pointed out the possibility of student activities and peer-to-peer communication in lectures, and stressed the importance of maintaining a high quality bar for studies. The importance of computer literacy skills of both teachers and students was emphasised. Students considered that distance learning also requires the necessary study equipment for its smooth running. Sound recording equipment is particularly important, as the pandemic has highlighted the need to professionally record students' performances, the process of their artistic self-development and the results. According to the students, the lack of contact or hybrid learning and distance learning make it difficult to adequately assess and understand their own learning progress, to control the quality of the acquired knowledge, and risk losing interest in the subject and the need to achieve high professional results and significant artistic achievements.

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