

Performing arts: Emerging from confinement

In the EU as elsewhere in the world, the performing arts were among the first sectors to be hit by measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus, and are now among the last to reopen. As the confinement measures are relaxed, the focus now is on supporting the performing arts and finding a way to re-engage with live audiences.

Confinement and the performing arts

The performing arts cover a variety of forms of artistic expression, presented in theatres, opera houses and music halls, at outdoor festivals, in open-air theatres and in the street – the presence of an audience being a key ingredient. The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic put the performing arts on hold, even in countries, such as [Sweden](#), that did not introduce strict lockdown measures, but followed the Commission [recommendations](#) on distancing and closure of cultural institutions.

Unesco reports that [128 countries](#) around the world had closed their cultural institutions down by mid-April; 95 % of Cirque du Soleil's workforce was laid off in March, for example. Many performing artists will lose their jobs, as the sector will be unable to operate normally for a longer time than the rest of the economy.

While opera houses, theatres, concert halls and individual performing artists or troupes have live-streamed performances via social media, participants in a Unesco-initiated [ResiliArt](#) debate pointed out that making cultural content available online for free sent the wrong message, even if it did promote access to culture and offer the public support during the confinement. The participants stressed that art and culture, and the performing arts in particular, needed to be experienced directly. Although digital access to cultural resources and content is important, in the long term it cannot replace the live artistic experience, which also needs to be paid for; artists need to make a living from their work too.

Unlocking the performing arts

EU Member States began easing confinement measures from mid-April onwards, but in most cases authorisation for live performances in both indoor and outdoor venues, such as summer festivals, is still some way off. The [roadmap](#) published by the European Commission in April confirmed that cultural events involving mass gatherings belong to the fourth and final stage of the easing of measures.

Unesco also pointed to complications in applying coronavirus-related sanitary measures in the [theatre](#) sector. One of the measures proposed by health authorities is to open theatres at 25 to 30 % capacity. This solution does not allow theatres to function normally, but it does create the conditions to start generating work protocols and to assess the development of contagion. However, opening at reduced capacity is not generally an economically viable option. The Royal Shakespeare Company, an example put forward by Unesco, needs to fill its theatres to 80 to 90% capacity in order to be financially viable. It has lost 75 % of its normal income because of the pandemic and has had to place around 90 % of its staff on furlough.

[PEARLE](#), the Performing Arts Employers' Associations League Europe, has presented strategies for reopening theatres and cultural activities in different European countries, [guidance](#) on risk assessment and prevention before resuming activities, and also guidelines on how theatres and venues can re-open for audiences. It has also reflected on the future of the sector, and ways to strike a balance between digital and live performances. In May, it called upon the EU institutions to define [common guidelines](#) to help theatres provide safe working conditions for people involved in productions and a safe environment for audiences to build their trust. Member States do not as yet have a [coordinated](#) approach to easing confinement measures in the live performance sector.

Examples from Member States

Some countries have compensated for theatre closures by organising shorter, improvised theatre plays in the open air. Spain, one of the first Member States to be hit by the pandemic and among those to have been hardest hit, is also among the first to reopen theatres, filling them to 30 % capacity. [Seville](#) has extended its cultural programme until the autumn, encouraging cultural events in the streets and public

spaces to support artists and cultural life. Similarly, in [Italy](#), where open-air festivals and opera performances attract many tourists, some such events will take place, but the Arena di Verona opera festival has been postponed until 2021, the 2020 edition being replaced by a summer festival scaled down in scope and capacity. Deutsche Oper [Berlin](#) adapted its outdoor carpark to present a shortened version of an opera played by just 22 musicians to a reduced number of spectators. Artists and theatre management can be very creative in finding ways to perform for the public, but not all Member States have weather conditions that allow outdoor events.

In most cases, the summer music festivals much loved by younger people have been forbidden until the end of August. In Czechia, less crowded alternatives are available, examples including a [drive-in rock](#) music festival, and the [ArtParking](#) project, which allows audiences to park and watch a live performance from their cars. Ticket and drink sales are contact-free, in line with public health measures.

EU funding, networks and co-funded projects supporting the sector

EU funds such as the [Creative Europe](#) programme support networks of cultural operators, enabling them to exchange good practices. Among them, the [European Festivals Association](#) provides information on events, such as festivals, that have been [cancelled](#), postponed, moved to the web or [maintained](#) under specific [conditions](#). [Live DMA](#) provides information on [measures](#) in particular countries. It has published 'Sound Diplomacy', a handbook on music cities' resilience and ways to protect the music and arts sectors from any coronavirus-like crisis.

A May 2020 [IETM](#) (the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts) publication '[Live Arts in the Virtualising World](#)' stressed that live arts need to be experienced directly for the magic of human interaction to operate. As this was an element that the virtual world could not provide, it called for live presentations of artistic works to recommence as soon as distancing measures were eased.

In a [statement](#) following the June 2020 International Theatre Conference, held online, the European Theatre Convention highlighted the financial loss to its member theatres. Stressing that confinement and coronavirus-related measures were threatening the sector's very existence, it called on the EU to raise the level of the Creative Europe funding from its current level of 0.08 % of the EU budget to 1 %.

In May 2020, the European Commission set up the [Creatives Unite](#) platform, to provide all cultural and creative industry sectors with coronavirus-related information and enable them to share their experiences.

The Creative Europe programme support scheme for the [cross-border distribution](#) of performing arts works (theatre, dance, circus and street arts) has highlighted two priorities emerging from the pandemic: the carbon footprint of mobility in the sector, and digital culture/virtual mobility. Reflection on measures to mitigate the sector's carbon footprint will examine the longer-term effects on artists' mobility and the sustainability of live recording and streaming as a way to reach audiences. A call for projects launched in mid-June will channel €2.5 million to the sector by the end of the year. The winning projects will explore ways to combine digital technology and live performance while retaining the direct experience of a show.

New [state aid](#) rules are allowing Member States to support sectors and workers hit by confinement measures, including the culture sector. A €40 million Croatian support scheme for small and medium-sized enterprises in the cultural sector and the creative industry will help up to 1 000 enterprises. Denmark is providing €12 million in compensation for organisers' losses arising from the cancellation of events, including cultural happenings, with 350 people or more. Sweden is also planning to support the cultural events sector with €38 million. Bulgaria will finance 60 % of the wage costs of cultural, amusement and recreational activities, to minimise lay-offs. Estonia too will provide companies and organisations active in the culture sectors affected with direct grants. In Lithuania, direct grants (with an estimated budget of €10 million) will support cultural and arts institutions and organisations hit by the pandemic for the creation of new, mostly digital, products and services.

The European Parliament has supported the performing arts sector by proposing measures such as [Music Moves Europe](#), and the reintroduction of the European Theatre Prize. Its call to [double the funding](#) for the 2021-2027 Creative Europe programme, the only EU funding to support cultural sectors, was unsuccessful. In June 2020, the European Parliament's Committee on Education and Culture expressed fierce [criticism](#) of the 13 % cut in funding in the new proposal for the EU budget, which would inevitably reduce the number of artists receiving support.

