

# Music, Pandemics, and History

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI)

Winter Term, 2022

Mondays, 10:00-11:15

January 10, 24, 31; February 7, 14, 21



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If 2020 were a key signature...



And here we are, sigh, in “**2020-too**”



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# Your Covid Experiences – 1

During the current pandemic (**CO**rona**VI**rus **D**isease **2019**), I experienced:

the death of someone close to me

my own illness

the illness of someone close to me

social isolation due to Covid-19

frustration due to Covid-19



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## Your Covid MUSICAL Experiences – 2

During the current pandemic (**CO**rona**VI**rus **D**isease 2019), I:

listened to music

shared music with friends and family

played or sang music

participated in a virtual ensemble

made music in person

composed music or created a music parody (new lyrics to an old song)



# Welcome!

- Cynthia Cyrus, [musicandpandemics@gmail.com](mailto:musicandpandemics@gmail.com)
- A thematic approach:
  - a. Jan 10: Music as narrative
  - b. Jan 24: Music as intercession
  - c. Jan 31: Music as education and advocacy
  - d. Feb 7: Music as embodied rage
  - e. Feb 14: Music as remembrance
  - f. Feb 21: Music as distraction
- Why? Because human response to pestilence and pandemic is as old as recorded history.



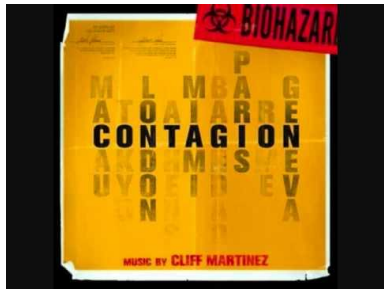
Music (as) the soundtrack of our lives...



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pYRBvj1yn0>



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“They're Calling My Flight,” music by Cliff Martinez – from “Contagion” (2011)

What does this music do to create tension?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBY7FnkNI4c>, Contagion (2011): Track 1 (0.00 to 1.49)



Or this, from The Andromeda Strain (1971)...

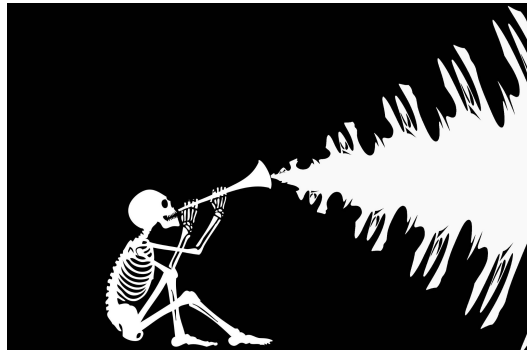
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMbSpnlOOtE>, Andromeda Strain (1971): Trailer (0.00 to 0.33)



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# Pandemic as apocalypse

- Higher pitch-level, with sustained sound (threat)
- Time irregularities
- Action in lower pitch registers rather than upper
- Harmonically unsettled
- Electronica
- Percussive markers



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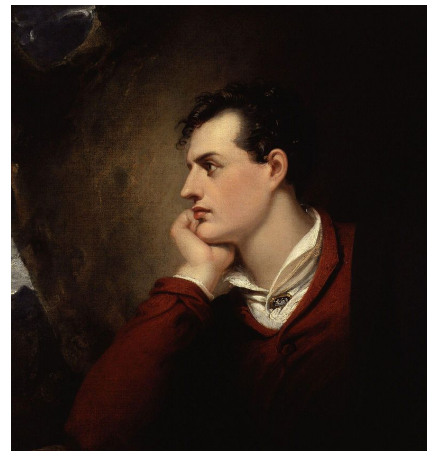
But, there is  
more than  
one story to  
be told



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## The Consumptive: poet, musician, aesthete

Lord Byron, looking into a mirror, ca. 1810:



“I look pale; I should like to die of a consumption.” “Why?” “Because the ladies would all say, ‘Look at that poor Byron, **how interesting** he looks in dying.’”

—account by Tom Moore in Byron’s (quasi-reconstructed) memoirs



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# Music, Narrative, and Pandemic

Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (1978)

- Attend to the stories we tell
  - Illness and shame
  - Illness as moral failing; health as morally upright
  - Illness as war (to which we could add “as apocalypse”)
- Idea-complexes around disease
  - Different diseases have different stories
  - Cancer (“demonic pregnancy”) vs TB (languid)
  - Such ideas can be detached from the symptoms and causes of those illnesses



What a cold little hand you have...

“Che gelida  
manina,”  
Ramón Vargas



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tIM9arlzZc>



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# They call me “Mimi,” but my name is Lucia

Mirella Freni as  
Mimi

*I love all things  
that have gentle sweet  
smells,  
that speak of love, of  
spring,  
of dreams and fanciful  
things,  
those things that have  
poetic names ...*



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTagFD\\_pkNo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTagFD_pkNo)



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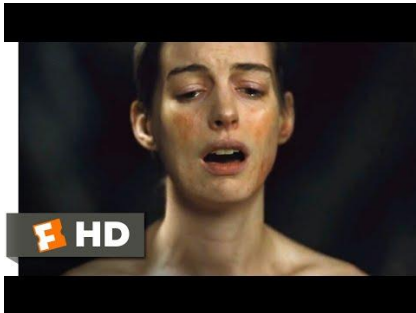


Gulfshore Opera's 2020 La Bohème (Mimi: Sarah Tucker  
Rodolfo: Peter Lake) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN5rRlhjPM8>  
(alternate: the Zeffirelli production: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5U2N2c96Kuk>)



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# And then there's Fantine (*Les Misérables*)



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIJXiB5i\\_q0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIJXiB5i_q0) | Dreamed A Dream (0.55-1.25)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ifJq0kKwI>, Come To Me/Fantine's Death (Les Mis 10th Anniversary Concert) (2:49-3.46)



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## Sontag on Consumption (TB)

“TB is disintegration, febrilization, dematerialization; it is a disease of liquids—the body turning to phlegm and mucus and sputum and, finally, blood—and of air, of the need for better air.”

“TB is often imagined as a disease of poverty and deprivation—of thin garments, thin bodies, unheated rooms, poor hygiene, inadequate food.”





# Even Sister Benedict can suffer... and transcend

What music sustains her? The school song...



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# The Consumptive Heroine: strength through suffering (transcendence! redemption!)

- Chopin died of consumption, 1849
- Violetta Valery (*La Traviata*, Giuseppe Verdi, 1853)
- Antonia (*Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, Jacques Offenbach, 1881)
- 1882: Robert Koch announces discovery of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*
- Mimi (*La Bohème*, Giacomo Puccini, 1896)
- Lady Madeline (*La Chute de la Maison Usher*, Claude Debussy, left incomplete 1918)
- Sister Benedict (*Bells of St Mary's*, 1945)
- Fantine (*Les Misérables*, 1980)



# Poul Ruders: Pestilence Songs (1975), performed by Anna Maria Wierød & Simon Wildau, 2013)

## *In Time of Pestilence* (Thomas Nashe) 1593

Each of the 6 strophes has its own music

This is stanza 2.



1. ADIEU, farewell earth's bliss!

This world uncertain is:

Fond are life's lustful joys,

Death proves them all but toys.

None from his darts can fly;

I am sick, I must die—

Lord, have mercy on us!

2. Rich men, trust not in wealth,

Gold cannot buy you health;

Physic himself must fade;

All things to end are made;

The plague full swift goes by;

I am sick, I must die—

Lord, have mercy on us!

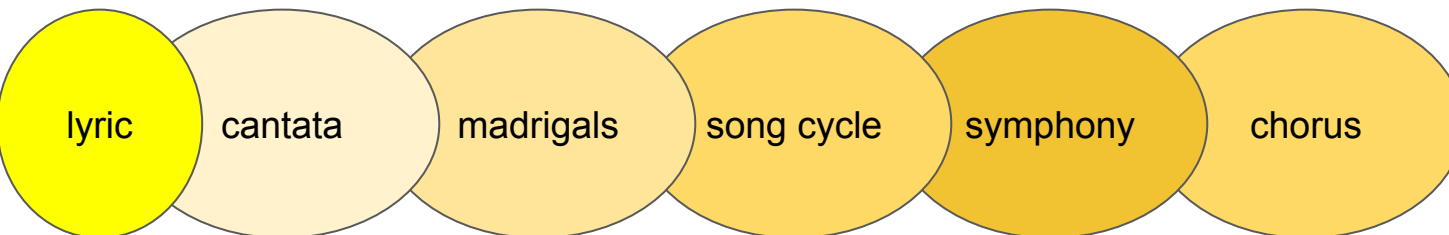
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri2LVMWHpJM>, 2.08-4.18



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# Pestilence themes cut across genres

- Thomas Nashe, **lyric in a play** (*Summer's Last Will and Testament*), 1592
  - Will Sommers was Henry VIII's court jester
- Constant Lambert **Cantata** (1932-1935)
- Ned Rorem, Song Cycle "In Times of Pestilence," six short **madrigals** for Mixed Chorus a cappella (1973)
- **Poul Ruders: Pestilence Songs (1975)**
- Anthony Burgess, In Times of Pestilence, for SATB **chorus** (1984)
- Jacob Avshalomov, **Symphony** of Songs, mvt 2: Adieu, Farewell Earth's Sweet Bliss (1994)
- Jonathan Dove's **Song Cycle** for double chorus, "The Passing of the Year" (2000)



Or, what about ...



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You have died of dysentery.



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# Cultural resonance

48 lyrics (ID'ed from lyrics.com, an AI aggregator)

- Mostly, but not exclusively rap
- A lot of them are explicit
- Some of them are hate-filled
- Dysentery is an ugly, bloody disease, with strong metaphorical meanings



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# Dysentery is History, particularly in musical theatre... (but it's impolite)

Book of Mormon (the musical):  
Act 2. Joseph Smith American  
Moses (it's just tooooo impolite)

**Dysentery World** (From the  
parody musical, The Trail to  
Oregon!) by Team StarKid (2015)

Father!  
The watchers have chosen, one of your  
family will die  
How?  
How will we die?  
Trench Mouth?  
No, dysentery

I've looked in the eyes of certain demons  
(We're always watching you.)  
There's an underworld right underneath...

It's a dysentery world  
(You'll die of dysentery, dysentery virus)  
For all you boys and girls  
(You'll die of dysentery, dysentery virus, b\_\_\_)  
It's the most popular of diseases  
(Popular)  
Selling out shows from coast to coast  
(We sell out, we sell out, we sell out)



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# Dysentery =

“Dysentery  
Gary”

He's a player, diarrhea giver  
Tried to grow his hair out, friends  
were listening to slayer  
I'd like to find him friday night  
Hanging out with mom, trying on his  
father's tights  
Life just sucks, I lost the one  
I'm giving up, she found someone  
There's plenty more  
Girls are such a drag

- Losing the game
  - “Mountainous” by Inkosi
  - “Silent Sultan” by Husl
- More generalized misery
  - “Ease” by John Lydon for PIL: Public Image Ltd
  - “LSD” by Cambatta, 2020 [“lyrics sick as dysentery”]
- Breaking up is like dysentery
  - “May 26” by Custom [Canadian rock musician]
  - “Your Time Has Come” by The Hippos
- Your boyfriend is like dysentery
  - “Dysentery Gary” by Blink-182
- Verbal dysentery, running off at the mouth
  - “Egg on Your Face” by Good Eggs
- Dysentery is apocalyptic\*\*\*
- Humorous poop song
  - Ivor Biggun - Richard The 3rd (He's In The Business Now)
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcaiocWGSNg>
- Water supply advocacy
  - Desolenator by Jack Stafford



Dysentery Gary (by Blink-182)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQ45bHZd8Tw>, .40-1.09



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I believe that in a war  
there are no winners.

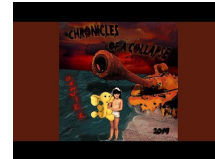
# Apocalyptic

War Hawks by Genviel from the  
album “Chronicles of a Collapse”

I'm so tired of human wars  
Never-ending holocaust  
All the futures that are lost  
In a single blinding flash  
Missiles raining from the sky  
Buildings crumble, people die  
Nobody questions why  
Corporations count the cash  
...



Special forces hone their skills  
Sending souls into the void  
Killings carried out by drones  
Rubble left in place of homes  
Walking over crunching bones  
In the name of greater good  
Cholera and dysentery  
Multiplying adversaries  
As the packs of mercenaries  
Paint the skyline black with soot



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSYb3MQigHY>, 0.00-0.42 and 1.39-2.10



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# Pandemic diseases: multiple meanings

Disease as threat (Our apocalyptic musical scores)

Disease as transfiguring (Mimi and TB heroines)

Disease as history / symbol (dysentery)

Disease as one of the deadly horsemen, linked to war



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# The opera about COVID frontline workers

<https://bellissimaopera.com/covidopera/>

**Available for screening until January 31st**

On Call is 1 hour in length, performed in English with English subtitles. It is appropriate for ages 8+. Donations are requested.

Created by librettist CHRISTINE STEYER, composer DAVID SHENTON and director CARL RATNER, the one-hour opera looks in on a series of “Zoom” calls by six medics struggling with the unfolding pandemic.

Calling in from Chicago, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro, Lombardy, New York City, and a Syrian refugee camp near Beirut, the colleagues provide each other a lifeline and ultimately discover that kindness and compassion can be as powerful a tool as a vaccine and ventilator.



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Next time (Jan 24):  
pandemics and the music of intercession



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