

Music Performance Anxiety and COVID-19: How Has the UK COVID-19 Lockdown between March and June 2020 Affected Music Performance Anxiety in Student Musicians?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how the first UK lockdown affected music performance anxiety (MPA) in student musicians in a rehearsal setting. Responses from 34 participants across several UK universities and conservatoires were recorded and analysed to consider whether COVID-19 had raised anxiety levels. Participants self-reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress in post-lockdown rehearsals for a range of reasons. Indeed, those who suffered from COVID-19 themselves or had family and/or close friends with the virus, alongside those without pre-existing mental health conditions, reported a higher rise in anxiety. The study also found conflicting information to the existing field on the rate of MPA between music and non-music students. Overall, it aims to highlight the necessity to investigate anxiety in relation to COVID-19 as the pandemic continues to affect the lives of many.

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has seen a rise in depression, stress, and anxiety, with mental health deteriorating among student communities (Chirikov et al., 2020; Grubic et al., 2020; Habe et al., 2020). The extended break in campus learning and socialising has accentuated issues of loneliness, isolation, academic and social disruption, and financial hardship, with these factors fuelling further anxieties (Zhai & Du, 2020). Cutting edge research reveals that ‘the prevalence of major depressive disorder among students is two times higher in 2020 compared to 2019 and the prevalence of generalised anxiety disorder is 1.5 times higher than in 2019’ (Chirikov et al., 2020, p. 1). The disruption of social identity has been described as one of the most psychologically hostile feelings a person can experience as it involves harming someone’s ability to relate to other individuals (Eisenberger, 2012). Therefore, ‘the perception of physical, psychological, emotional, and social distancing from others can cause a range of negative emotional experiences’ (Hamza et al., 2020, p. 1). Whilst research on student mental health during the pandemic is now being published, the connection between mental health and music, in particular, is yet to be discussed.

Music performance anxiety (MPA) is an element of both rehearsals and concerts for many young musicians and is defined as ‘the experience of marked and persistent anxious apprehension related to musical performance that has arisen through specific anxiety-conditioning experiences’ (Kenny, 2009, p. 433; Nicholson et al., 2014). It is a complex phenomenon caused by multiple factors, including environment and genetics, alongside individual emotions,

experience, cognitions, and behaviours (Kenny, 2011; Osborne & Franklin, 2002). MPA ‘extends along a continuum of varying severity’ and can cause both positive and negative effects. Yet, previous studies have reported a higher level of MPA in individuals who also suffer from anxiety and depression outside of music (Baxter, 2020; Brotons, 1994; Cox & Kenardy, 1993; Robson & Kenny, 2017; Spahr, 2015).

Whilst the majority of previous research into undergraduate students and MPA solely references music students, this report combined MPA with mental health in relation to COVID-19, heralding students from multiple subject areas (Cox & Kenardy, 1993; Dews & Williams, 1989; Spahr et al., 2016; Thomas & Nettelbeck, 2014; Zakaria et al., 2013). Traits of depression and stress are just as common in non-music students and anxiety is still present in non-music students, yet music students are more likely to suffer from MPA if they suffer from general anxiety outside of music (Aderman et al., 1989; Baxter, 2020; Kenny et al., 2012). Conflicting research to previous MPA literature into the rising rate of these traits during the pandemic indicates that those without pre-existing mental health concerns have become significantly more distressed (Hamza et al., 2020).

Although research on both MPA and student mental health during the pandemic exist respectively, this study is currently exclusive in combining the areas together. Considering previous research, three vital research questions can be constructed: 1) whether general MPA rates in post-lockdown rehearsals have increased, 2) whether those who have directly suffered from COVID-19 report a higher increase in MPA, 3) whether those without pre-existing depression, anxiety, and stress report a higher increase in MPA.

Three main hypotheses can be drawn from these research questions. The first hypothesis is that MPA will have increased in student musicians since the start of the pandemic. This is supported by reports listing an increase in anxiety since March 2020 (Chirikov et al., 2020; Grubic et al., 2020; Hamza et al., 2020; Savage et al., 2020). The second hypothesis is that those who have suffered directly from COVID-19 will have a higher rise in anxiety in comparison to those who have not been directly affected. This includes those who have had COVID-19 themselves, as well as members of their family or close friends who have suffered. The hypothesis is evidenced by reports that show that a diagnosis of COVID-19 was associated with an increased incidence of a psychiatric diagnosis in the following 14 to 90 days (Taquet et al., 2020). The final hypothesis is that

those without pre-existing mental health issues will see a larger rise in anxiety levels (Chirikov et al., 2020; Savage et al., 2020; Taquet et al., 2020).

An additional hypothesis was that 1. those playing solo parts, and 2. those who had practised, in general, significantly less than others during the lockdown period, would have higher rates of anxiety (Baxter, 2020; Robson & Kenny, 2017). Furthermore, the biggest reason for MPA will be the effects of social isolation, generated through a long period of lockdown that halted rehearsals (Chirikov et al., 2020; Grubic et al., 2020; Savage et al., 2020). The crux of this report aims to combine the subject of MPA with the impact on mental health caused by the pandemic. Through examination, it can be determined whether anxiety levels in post-lockdown rehearsal settings have risen in light of typical student coping mechanisms being removed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. METHOD

Design. The survey was designed to contain a mixture of descriptive and numerical questions via an online platform (see Appendix). It opened with a demographic section that also introduced the twin research areas of the study: COVID-19 and MPA. This was followed by three further blocks: two DASS-21 lists, centred around pre- and post-lockdown rehearsals, and a more detailed section about post-summer lockdown MPA that included questions qualitative in nature (Henry & Crawford, 2005). The dependent variables in this study consist of the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress participants felt when taking part in ensemble rehearsals. The independent variable is the time period in question, with answers surrounding both pre- and post-lockdown settings.

Participants. Thirty-four complete responses were collected that fitted the survey's essential criteria, of which 10 were male (29%), 23 were female (68%) and one was non-binary (3%). All participants were aged between 18-25 ($M=20.67$) and in higher education, currently enrolled at either a university or conservatoire in the UK; 31 were at Durham University (91%) and three attended other institutions (9%). For data to be analysed, volunteers must have performed in a student ensemble, either instrumental or vocal, both pre- and post- the COVID-19 summer lockdown that took place between March and June 2020. This did not have to be a university ensemble. All participants were recruited through social media, focusing on online orchestral and choral groups to collate answers from suitable volunteers. The survey was shared online and all participants provided an informed consent.

Materials/Stimuli. The software used to create this study was Qualtrics. Comprised of four sections, the first collected demographic data and consensual information. The main test of the survey was the DASS-21 questionnaire, which had to be completed twice in reference both to pre- and post-lockdown rehearsals (Lovibond, 2005). DASS is an instrument used to assess the perceived severity of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. It is well established, and several studies have been published to highlight its international validity (Sinclair et al., 2012; Henry & Crawford, 2005). The condensed

version of the DASS survey, DASS-21, was employed as this meant data was collected in relation to two scenarios whilst keeping the length of the survey under 10 minutes. This encouraged completion from participants, with 34 out of 40 originally launched responses completed, providing an 81% completion rate. The DASS-21 is a form of self-reporting, deemed to be the most appropriate form to measure anxiety out of the three existing procedures for this particular study. The other two forms are psychophysiological measures and behavioural observation (Kenny, 2011). The final section of the survey provided further questions relating specifically to MPA and COVID-19. It rated the severity of MPA in post-lockdown rehearsals on a scale from 'extremely anxious' to 'confident', and collated reasons for MPA, including, but not limited to 'I hadn't played with people for a long time', 'general MPA that I have always experienced', and 'coronavirus risks'.

Procedure. A multitude of questions were posed to the participants in the opening section. Participants had to first agree to take part in the survey, confirming consent before continuing. Alongside demographic data, they had to confirm whether they had attended either orchestral or vocal in person rehearsals, both pre- and post-lockdown. They were also asked whether themselves and/or any of their close friends and/or family had contracted COVID-19, and when this had occurred. Participants were finally asked whether they suffered from any anxiety outside of MPA, expanding on this if they were comfortable to do so. Participants were then required to complete the DASS-21 survey twice. The final section asked a further series of questions, providing detail of MPA specifically in post-lockdown rehearsals. All data was collected via self-reporting in the aim to remove any subjective researcher biases. The combination of numerical ratings alongside the opportunity to give a qualitative reflection on MPA provided a varied data sets to be analysed.

3. RESULTS

The results of this study showed that, in general, students were more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress in rehearsals after the March-June 2020 lockdown. This conclusion was determined in reference to answers from both the DASS-21 survey and more descriptive follow-up questions.

Figure 1 shows the DASS-21 scores used to measure depression, anxiety, and stress levels in students in pre- and post-lockdown rehearsals. The results presented a significantly higher average in all three areas in post-lockdown scores, with the mean of each area rising by at least one level on the DASS-21 scoring system. Depression moved from normal ($M=6.79$) to moderate ($M=19.00$). Anxiety rose from moderate ($M=11.53$) to severe ($M=16.58$). And stress moved from mild ($M=13.65$) to moderate ($M=19.16$). These results align with the hypothesis that DASS-21 scores in post-lockdown rehearsals would increase. *T*-tests were run between the cumulative pre- and post-lockdown scores (depression + anxiety + stress), which resulted in a statistically significant difference between the two time periods, with a *p* value of 0.0003. Comparing this data to the follow up questions (Figure 2), 22 participants self-reported an increase of anxiety in post-lockdown rehearsals.

Out of the remaining 12 students, nine felt the same level of MPA as previous rehearsals, and, three felt confident.

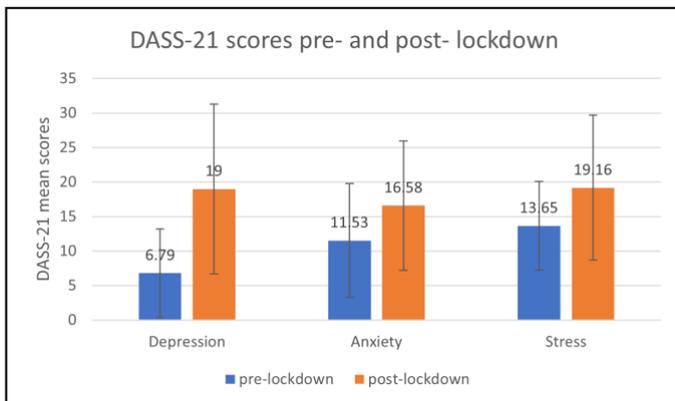


Figure 1. Breakdown of DASS-21 scores self-reported pre- and post-summer 2020 lockdown

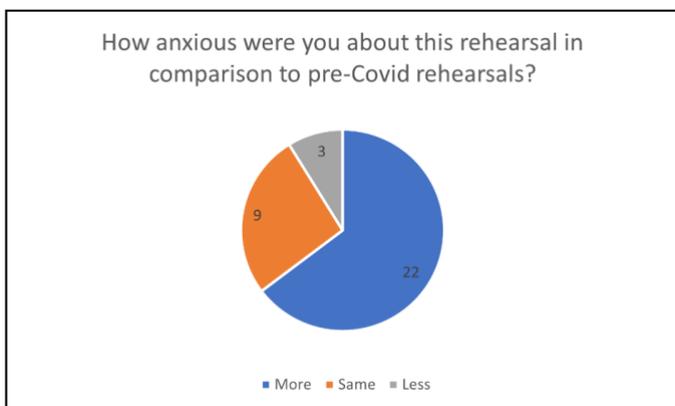


Figure 2. Anxiety levels in the first rehearsal post-lockdown in comparison to pre-pandemic rehearsals

These scores were also organised to compare the growth in these areas in those who suffered from Coronavirus to those who had not (Figure 3). 21 participants (62%) were directly affected by COVID-19, whilst 13 (38%) were not. Although the collective averages only rose three points in those affected, the results in relation to anxiety were more significant. The average level in anxiety of those who had suffered directly rose just over double the amount of those who had not: a mean of 10.96 in comparison to 5.22. This provides evidence of the third hypothesis, with those without pre-existing mental health issues reporting a higher rise in anxiety. Participants were also asked to rate their MPA on a scale from ‘extremely anxious’ to ‘I felt confident’. Out of the 19 music students, 16 (84%) reported feeling either extremely or slightly anxious, whilst nine (60%) of the 15 non-music students reported this. These results highlight that participants are not always conscious of the anxiety they numerically report.

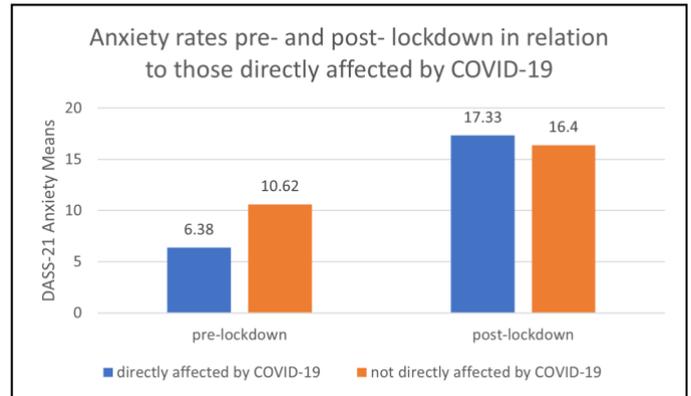


Figure 3. Pre- and post-lockdown anxiety levels in direct comparison to those who had or had not been affected by COVID-19

Looking at vast amounts of data can allow us to lose sight of the human qualities behind surveys such as this one; therefore, this study also collected descriptive responses concerning both anxiety and COVID-19. 17 (50%) participants suffered from anxiety outside of MPA and were asked to divulge further details. Poignant descriptions here ranged from “anxiety attacks”, to being “diagnosed with GAD” (general anxiety disorder), and “taking citalopram”, with multiple participants referencing the pandemic as a reason for heightened anxiety. Alongside this, participants were asked to comment on their experiences with COVID-19, once again collating striking responses. These include, “my grandfather passed away from coronavirus... it has been devastating”, “I lost my sense of smell and taste, could barely talk, had a high temperature and could barely move”, and “I have long COVID and find myself struggling with day-to-day tasks and worried it will affect my degree”.

Alongside the results pertaining to the three main hypotheses, further tests were carried out in relation to the sub-hypotheses. Participants were asked to justify reasons for anxiety in the post-lockdown rehearsal (Figure 4). In line with the sub-hypothesis that many would struggle due to the long break from performing with others, 23 of the 34 participants (68%) gave this reason, making it the most popular cause of anxiety increase, concluding, as in other studies, that social isolation is detrimental to mental health (Chirikov et al., 2020). The second most popular reason given was general MPA, with 11 participants (32%) citing this cause, confirming that although COVID-19 has affected general nervousness, MPA continues to be a predictable cause of anxiety during rehearsals.

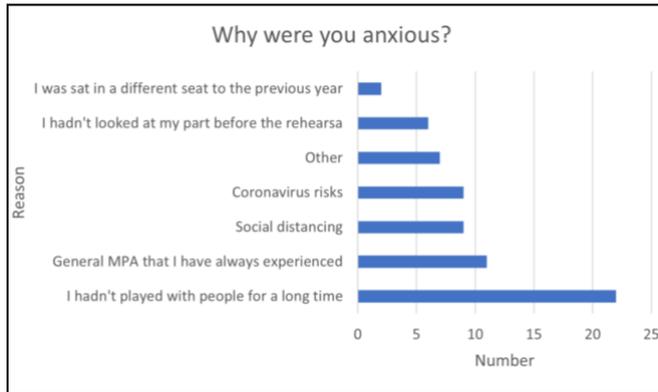


Figure 4. Reasons behind anxiety

Results in relation to the additional hypotheses on soloists and practice regimes also provided intriguing results, beneficial to those aiming to replicate the study through their link to hypothesis three. Surprisingly, the average DASS-21 score of soloists in contrast to group performers was almost identical in pre-lockdown rehearsals ($M=32.95$ in comparison to $M=33.50$), contrasting previous reports (Baxter, 2020; Robson & Kenny, 2017). Yet, in the post-lockdown data, the soloists' average rose to $M=56.95$, in comparison to $M=49.00$ in group performers, supporting the sub-hypothesis that soloists were more likely to suffer from anxiety in rehearsal settings. Additionally, lockdown practice regimes revealed a 13.47 average higher rise (Figure 5) in those who practised less than once a week ($M=67.71$) in comparison to those who practised five or more times a week ($M=48.00$). These results followed previous reports, providing evidence that an increased practice schedule alleviates performance anxiety (Baxter, 2020). Finally, in conflict with previous studies, anxiety levels recorded were almost identical between music ($M=16.74$) and non-music ($M=16.40$) students (Baxter, 2020; Cox & Kenardy, 1993).

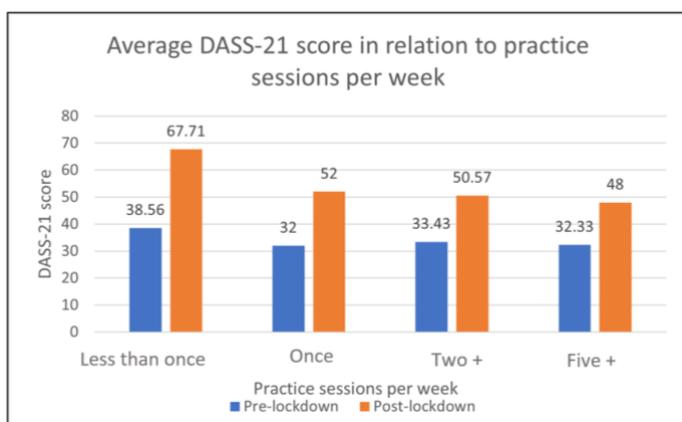


Figure 5. DASS-21 scores pre- and post-lockdown relating to how much participants practised during the summer 2020 lockdown

4. DISCUSSION

This study looked at the correlation between rising rates of MPA alongside general depression, anxiety, and stress in student musicians in reference to the first 2020 UK lockdown

of the Coronavirus pandemic. It surveys evidence of anxiety in students in extracurricular activities, and the results provide worrying feedback.

The findings of this experiment support hypothesis one, in that depression, anxiety, and stress will have risen in students attending rehearsals in a post-lockdown environment. They also support hypothesis two, to an extent, showing that anxiety levels rose further in those who have been directly affected by COVID-19: the average increase in anxiety in DASS-21 for those directly affected was 10.96 ($M=17.33-6.38$) in contrast with 5.22 for those who had not suffered ($M=15.84-10.62$). It should also be acknowledged that those who did not have pre-existing mental health issues suffered from a higher rise in anxiety, in line with the third hypothesis. These results follow Hamza et al. (2020), indicating that new mental health issues are developing in those without pre-existing problems before the pandemic and conflict with previous MPA reports (Baxter, 2020; Kenny, 2011). Furthermore, the additional hypothesis that the most popular reason for anxiety in post-lockdown rehearsals would be isolation was also correct, in line with all previous reports that documented isolation as a significant hindrance to socialising (Chirikov et al., 2020; Eisenberger, 2012; Hamza et al., 2020; Kenny & Ackermann, 2015).

Yet, there are still limitations to this project. Demographically, the study could be controlled further, with fewer male students completing the survey (29%), as well as only one non-binary participant (3%). Only three students did not attend Durham University (9%), which is not an objective issue, as this allowed further investigation into numbers released by the university in relation to mental health. However, it would be edifying to replicate the study within other institutions to discover similarities and discrepancies in results. Yet, due to this, it was not possible to compare Durham students to non-Durham students or even university students to conservatoire students. Furthermore, a self-report methodology is based on retrospective recall which will never be fully accurate. Additionally, the small sample size cannot represent the whole student community, other cultures, or professionals. Thus the findings cannot be generalised outside of the sample group's results. Indeed, cellist Laura van der Heijden commented in her recent article that 'for a while I felt liberated from the anxieties of performance... however, as soon as the red light came on, the pressure and tightness returned' (van de Heijden, 2021). She is joined by many other professional musicians in having MPA, and her reaction to the pandemic indicates that there is the capacity for an academic study into this area (Cohen et al., 2019; Fernholz et al., 2019).

There are also several changes I would consider if I were to repeat this investigation. The study only considers responses before and after the first 2020 lockdown, yet future studies could gauge further insight into the area by studying live performances, which should begin to take place as restrictions are lifted in the coming months. It could also look into online rehearsals, of which many student societies have pioneered over the last academic year. Additionally, the study only focused on MPA in the student population; however as previously stated, a similar survey could be conducted on

professional musicians, who have also become isolated from group rehearsals over the past year. Finally, whilst the DASS-21 survey provides a relaxed mood, the Kenny MPA Inventory (Kenny, 2011) and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, 1983) are more psychologically thorough. Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider the form of numerical data collected if those carrying out future experiments have access to additional time and believe that their participants would be willing to partake in a more meticulous study.

I will conclude by referencing statistics collected externally to this report, about Durham University, returning the discussion to the importance of mental health. The university's counselling service 'has experienced a 39% increase in appointments, increased as a result of COVID-19', with a '127% increase in the total number of consultations and administrative actions carried out' (Palatinat, 2021). To date, the greatest demand for mental health support the university has experienced arose during lockdown periods of the pandemic. Whilst this survey was open for all to partake in, only three participants did not attend Durham University. Therefore, these closing figures draw particular attention to the core importance behind this survey and the issues of deteriorating mental health in students, specifically at Durham University.

To summarise, this study has looked at the correlation between rising rates of MPA alongside the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown that took place between March and June 2020 and provides worrying results on student mental health. In line with previous COVID-19-related research, it confirmed that students are more likely to suffer from MPA in post-lockdown rehearsals. It also found that those without pre-existing mental health issues were more likely to report a larger rise in anxiety levels, conflicting with previous MPA research. Yet, this is most likely due to the extreme effect of COVID-19 on all areas of life and a broad plethora of people.

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APPENDIX

Complete Questionnaire

1. Are you currently a university student?
Yes - at Durham University/Yes - not at Durham University, instead at:/No
 2. Do you study Music?
Yes/No, instead I study:
 3. How old are you
18-21/22-25/Over 25
 4. What is your gender?
Male/Female/Non-Binary/Prefer not to say
 5. What is your instrument/voice part?
 6. Did you play in a student orchestra/sing in a student choir the 2019/20 academic year, prior to the Coronavirus pandemic?
Yes - at university/Yes - not at university/No
 7. Have you played in a student orchestra/sung in a student choir since the first lockdown (March-May 2020)?
Yes/No
 8. Have you, a member of your family, or a close friend suffered from Coronavirus?
Yes/No
 - 8a. If you answered yes, and you are comfortable providing further details, about how this has affected you, please do so here. Such as which months they had Coronavirus.
 9. Do you suffer with anxiety outside of music performance?
Yes/No
 - 9a. If you answered yes, and you are comfortable doing so, please explain further
- MPA in pre-lockdown rehearsals
- Please read each statement and choose a number 0, 1, 2 or 3 which indicates how much the statement applied to you in pre-COVID-19 rehearsals. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any statement.
- The rating scale is as follows:
0 - Did not apply to me at all
1 - Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time
2 - Applied to me to a considerable degree or a good part of time
3 - Applied to me very much or most of the time
1. I found it hard to wind down
 2. I was aware of dryness in my mouth
 3. I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all
 4. I experienced breathing difficulty (e.g., excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)
 5. I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things
 6. I tended to over-react to situations
 7. I experienced trembling (e.g., in the hands)
 8. I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy
 9. I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself
 10. I felt that I had nothing to look forward to
 11. I found myself getting agitated
 12. I found it difficult to relax
 13. I felt down-hearted and blue
 14. I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing
 15. I felt I was close to panic
 16. I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything
 17. I felt I wasn't worth much as a person
 18. I felt that I was rather touchy
 19. I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (e.g. sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat)
 20. I felt scared without any good reason

21. I felt that life was meaningless

MPA in post-lockdown rehearsals (part one)

Please read each statement and choose a number 0, 1, 2 or 3 which indicates how much the statement applied to you in the first post-lockdown rehearsal you attended. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any statement.

The rating scale is as follows:

0 - Did not apply to me at all

1 - Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

2 - Applied to me to a considerable degree or a good part of time

3 - Applied to me very much or most of the time

1. I found it hard to wind down

2. I was aware of dryness in my mouth

3. I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all

4. I experienced breathing difficulty (e.g. excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)

5. I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things

6. I tended to over-react to situations

7. I experienced trembling (e.g., in the hands)

8. I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy

9. I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself

10. I felt that I had nothing to look forward to

11. I found myself getting agitated

12. I found it difficult to relax

13. I felt down-hearted and blue

14. I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing

15. I felt I was close to panic

16. I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything

17. I felt I wasn't worth much as a person

18. I felt that I was rather touchy

19. I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (e.g. sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat)

20. I felt scared without any good reason

21. I felt that life was meaningless

MPA in post-lockdown rehearsals (part two)

1. Think about the first rehearsal you attended in Michaelmas term after the summer lockdown. Were you anxious at this rehearsal?
Yes – extremely/Yes – slightly/Neither anxious or confident/No – I was confident

2. If you answered yes to the previous question, why were you anxious? (select all that apply)

I hadn't played with people for a long time/General MPA that I have always experienced/Social distancing/Coronavirus risks/I hadn't looked at my part before the rehearsal/I was sat in a different seat to the previous year/Other (please specify)

3. In general, how anxious were you about this rehearsal in comparison to rehearsals previous to Coronavirus?

More anxious/The same/Less anxious

4. Was it just you on your part or were other musicians on it too? (e.g., multiple violin players on a single part in a string section)
Solo part/Multiple players

5. What seat/part were you sat in? (e.g., second clarinet, first soprano)

6. How difficult did you find your part?

Difficult/Average/Easy

7. Did you look at your part prior to the rehearsal?

Yes/No

8. How well did you play/sing in the rehearsal?

Better than pre-COVID/The same as pre-COVID/Worse than pre-COVID

9. How often did you practice over the summer lockdown?

5+ days a week/2+ days a week/Once a week/Less than once a week

10. Did your anxiety die down in later rehearsals?

Yes – lots/Yes – slightly/No