

## “ACABARAM AS FESTAS”: A MÚSICA POP RUSSA NO CONTEXTO DO AUTO-ISOLAMENTO<sup>1</sup>

*“No More Parties”: Russian pop music in the context of self-isolation*

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### RESUMO

O artigo analisa como a música pop russa respondeu à pandemia do coronavírus e sua consequente quarentena e auto-isolamento. As canções que surgiram sob as restrições da quarentena e se dedicaram diretamente ao tema podem ser divididas em três blocos temáticos: canções sobre política, romance e cotidiano. Em cada uma dessas áreas, o autor das composições encontra padrões de enredo e sons que são consistentes com a situação extrema ou, ao contrário, que tentam ignorá-la. O artigo também trata das características dos videoclipes que surgiram sob essas novas condições. Em particular, discute os contextos envolvendo símbolos materiais de quarentena (máscara, papel higiênico), bem como diferentes formas de incorporar a imagem do médico nos videoclipes. O artigo especifica ainda o que particulariza os videoclipes caseiros filmados por estrelas pop. Por fim, busca-se investigar as razões do sucesso fenomenal da música "Crying at a Techno Party" (interpretada por "Khleb" e "Cream coda"), que foi escrita muito antes da pandemia, mas de repente se tornou seu símbolo musical.

**Palavras-chave:** Música Pop Russa. Coronavírus. Quarentena. Auto-Isolamento. Videoclipes. Vídeos Caseiros.

### ABSTRACT

The article analyzes how Russian pop music has responded to the coronavirus pandemic and its attendant quarantine and self-isolation. The songs that appeared under the quarantine restrictions and directly devoted to the issue could be divided into three theme blocks: politics, romance, and everyday life. In each of these areas, the author finds plot and music patterns that are consistent with the extreme situation or, conversely, attempt to ignore it. The article also deals with the features of video clips that have emerged under the new conditions. In particular, it discusses the contexts involving material quarantine symbols (mask, toilet paper), as well as different ways of incorporating the image of a doctor in the video clips. The article also specifies what distinguishes home-video clips shot by pop stars. In addition, the author analyzes the reasons for the phenomenal success of the song "Crying

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at a Techno Party" (performed by "Khleb" and "Cream coda"), which was written long before the pandemic, but suddenly became its music symbol.

**Key-words:** Russian pop music. Coronavirus. Quarantine. Self-Isolation. Video Clips, Home-Video.

Of all the arts, pop music proved to be best prepared for the epidemic constraints. By the end of the 2010s, most processes of creation, distribution and perception of pop songs have gone digital, that is, almost entirely provided by computer technology and the Internet. In contrast to academic music, pop music today is often written on a computer and requires a minimum number of "live" musicians. The development of technology makes it possible to mix a record without leaving the "bedroom"<sup>3</sup>. Music streaming services have almost completely replaced physical media. Along with YouTube video hosting, the former have become a priority way to distribute music. Musicians very quickly learned even to create video clips in a situation of self-isolation. In fact, only concert activities were affected, which did not become a hindrance, though, since live broadcasts of artists' performances from home were organized on the same streaming platforms and on YouTube<sup>4</sup>. Thus, technologically, the field of pop music was fully equipped to go online.

It is a different matter, though, how the epidemic has affected the content and aesthetics of new pop songs, and how the listening demand for pop music has changed. In this article, I will focus on three aspects of the new mode of pop music functioning. Firstly, I intend to characterize the songs directly dedicated to the theme of the epidemic, quarantine, self-isolation and coronavirus. Secondly, I will consider the features of the video clips which appeared in the new environment. Thirdly, I will analyze the listening preferences which emerged between April and May 2020. I would like to note that I make my observations exclusively on the basis of Russian pop

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<sup>3</sup> There is known to be even a special definition of "bedroom music", associated with youth pop stars creating their first hits in bedrooms. For more information about the technology of this phenomenon, see chapter "Hit Parad za kotoryi ne stydno" [A worthy Hit Parade] in the book by Julia Strakovich (2014, p. 189-202).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Yandex.Music has a selection of playlists under the hashtag "Concertfrom-home". For more information on streaming concerts, see the article by Elena Savitskaya (2020).

music and mainly refer to the data of the largest Russian streaming platform Yandex.Music, as well as the Russian segment of YouTube.

By the end of the official lockdown regime, searching for such words as “quarantine”, “virus”, “coronavirus”, one could find more than 1100 tracks for each request on Yandex.Music, that is, a total of about 3500 songs. The service gives out significantly fewer tracks for the words “self-isolation” (54) and “epidemic” (203), but an impressive number of playlists, that is, thematic collections of songs, (151 and 648 respectively)<sup>5</sup> pops up by these tags. Thus, according to statistics, the situation with the coronavirus pandemic provided a powerful creativity boost among musicians of various styles. Many top artists have spoken on this topic, for example Olga Buzova, Grigory Leps, “Spleen”, Semyon Slepakov, Vasya Oblomov, Alexey Potapenko (PTP, ex-half of “Potap and Nastia” duo), Timur Rodriguez, Alexander Gudkov and Ivan Urgant. Also, thanks to the quick response to the hot topic, previously little-known performers, such as “Cream coda”, CMH, KARTASHOW, Gidayyat-Gazan, T-killah, became headliners.

We can broadly distinguish three main categories that the theme of “coronavirus” songs is based on: politics, romance, everyday life. The first two categories are not new, but the situation with the pandemic has revealed new nuances in them. The third category, associated with the description of the details of everyday life, was previously quite marginal, but the lockdown regime introduced this topic into the songs of a wide variety of artists, regardless of their style and status. I suggest that we consider the trends in each of the given categories by reference to some specific examples.

### **“Harry, all this is not very normal”: social and political reflection**

The extreme situation with the pandemic greatly exacerbated longstanding political and economic problems in Russia, and the lockdown regime provided plenty of time to reflect on them. It is no coincidence that during the quarantine, there appeared quite a number of acute social songs, which joylessly list the “achievements” of the ruling party. The most

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Yandex.Music provides not only Russian, but also foreign songs, which the service also takes into account, even in requests typed in Cyrillic.

striking examples are the following songs: “Viral” by Semyon Slepakov, “Give it to Harry Potter in case you meet him” by “Spleen” along with “In a queue” and “To my Grandmother to the Village” by Vasily Oblomov<sup>6</sup>. Despite the difference in image and music styles of these performers, there are some common features in their compositions. All four songs take a retrospective look at the changes that have taken place in Russia in recent years, addressing the issues of corruption, raising the retirement age, banning rallies and protests, and mentioning the upcoming “zeroing” of presidential terms<sup>7</sup>.

Semyon Slepakov and Vasya Oblomov build their narrative on behalf of a small-minded man. Slepakov's character gives a long list of perennial national problems: *“That we are screwed and the country is in deep sh\*t, / And the Duma is filled with thieves, and there's only Petrov in films, / There're traffic jams everywhere, the air is dirty, there is no sun / And the traffic cop is an asshole”*. In the end, however, the character comes to the conclusion that all this was not as terrifying as coronavirus: *“But it turned out that then everything was \*\*\* [awesome] / Coronavirus, Coronavirus, \*\*\* [get off]”*.

Similarly, Vasya Oblomov builds the story of his two songs on everyman perspective. In his song “In a queue”, he cites in different voices scraps of idle misconceptions about coronavirus and folk methods of dealing with it: *“People, what are we waiting for? What the fuck are we waiting for? / Let's make hair dryers into ECMO. /I heard Ikea has just got coffins, /I've bought one, but will I have time to assemble it?”* In “To my Grandmother to the Village”, similar urgent problems are presented in the form of a collective letter to Valentina Tereshkova<sup>8</sup>, who is asked on behalf of the public to tighten the screws on all fronts: *“Tereshkova is written again: / “Tell the President, / No matter how bad it is, / Do not give money to people!”*.

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<sup>6</sup> Vasily Goncharov's stage name.

<sup>7</sup> I have to clarify that, due to the quarantine, voting on the amendments to the Constitution was postponed from April 22 to July 1, 2020. Therefore, the musicians in their compositions written during the quarantine only predicted the outcome of the upcoming voting.

<sup>8</sup> The world's first female cosmonaut. It was she who, as a deputy of the Russian State Duma, proposed an amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, allowing Vladimir Putin to run for president twice again.

“A naive letter” imitation reveals a bitter absurdity of events taking place in the country. The author's voice seems to withdraw itself, and the songs contain neither direct calls for protest nor moralizing. On the contrary, they are composed of well-known facts and events. Yet, expressed by ordinary people and, most importantly, humbly accepted by them, these signs of real life turn into a tragic phantasmagoria, frightening for all its authenticity.

The nature of the music which is used to sound the messages plays an important role in this effect. It is predominantly monotonous and devoid of any vivid intonation changes. It has no unusual harmonies, and the sound fabric also disguises itself as the routine. Semyon Slepakov even imitates a relaxed reggae style and introduces sweet-voiced female back-vocals and a lot of timbre supporting voices to the arrangement of the song. One gets the impression that the lulling music itself has long come to terms with the events described in the song; it deceptively envelops and soothes, with no intention of moralizing. Due to the external indifference of the plot narrative and its music design, there appears a non-trivial artistic effect: the more elegant the showcase looks, the more acutely aware we are of the hidden background of the described events.

The songs “Viral” and “To my Grandmother to the Village” formally have specific addressees. While Semyon Slepakov addresses coronavirus, Vasya Oblomov intends to make contact with Valentina Tereshkova. Yet, the futility of this appeal is obvious to everyone – the message is not very likely to be received, and even less likely it is to be heard. Alexander Vasiliev and his band “Spleen” use a similar strategy with their song story. The artist addresses his letter to a fictional character, obviously far from Russia and its problems – the legendary Harry Potter. It is implied that only a miracle can save Russia in the current situation, therefore the almighty wizard was chosen as the addressee.

Harry, we need you as soon as possible:  
The indestructible is now improbable;  
From every patch, from every hollow  
They're pumping out oil and gas.  
It's already planned, and if God allows  
We all soon will be herded to gallows;  
Please bring your magic baton  
To hit 'em between the eyes.

Unlike the characters of Slepakov and Oblomov, Alexander Vasiliev's character is well aware of the depth and abnormality of the events taking place. He is equal to Harry Potter in his fundamental honesty and insight, but, alas, not equal in his capabilities. An informal style of interaction between the characters (*"Harry, hello, how are you, buddy?"*) only enhances the feeling of tragedy. It is no coincidence, as Ian Schenkman put it, that this message "from the real world to the world of illusions that we have lived in over the last twenty years" is terrifying (Novaya Gazeta, 2020). Again, an important role in creating such an impression is played by music, deliberately monotonous and devoid of any "special effects", with recitatives to the strumming of a guitar, like news from the battlefield. The character seems to have no emotions left, and he distantly gives out chilling dry facts. It is only in the coda that the rhetorical question *"Why is it all happening to us, tell us, Harry Potter?"* is interspersed with a wordless howl full of despair.

The theme of the notorious isolation is also heard in this song. Except the fact that by a "voluntary" prisoner, they mean Russia as the entire country, cut off from civilized political management, mired in bureaucratic lawlessness (*I send kind regards from everybody / Who dwells in our bog. / We're surrounded only by muggles, / Their evil mugs speak of troubles*).

Thus, the situation of "timelessness" and uncertainty has encouraged nonconformist musicians to sum up the disappointing results of contemporary life in Russia. Significantly, many of them, consciously or not, chose a distance form of letter writing for this purpose. Although it is known that these messages are not likely to reach the formal addressees, as numerous comments on YouTube show, they do invite considerations of what is happening to us.

Today, songs dedicated to doctors can be classified as justifiably acute social statements. However, one and the same theme sounds completely different - with a different degree of drama, reliability and sincerity.

Take for example "Zhara" TV channel that encouraged more than a dozen top Russian pop-artists, including Stas Mikhailov, Lyubov Uspenskaya, Nikolay Baskov, Nargiz, Artik&Asti to team up and record a song with a self-explanatory name "#Thankyoudoctors". The idea of the authors

of the song was to “express gratitude to all doctors, all medical staff” on behalf of popular artists. The music of the song in the style of a spirit-lifting ballad contrasts with completely impersonal lyrics. It goes that while the entire country is suffering from idleness, doctors are doing the job, demonstrating selfless mobilization: “*They are in the midst of the night lights while you sleep / They abandon their children and mothers again / While, bored, you stay at home / They are always on the run to rescue parents and children’s lives*”.

Absolutely helpless in artistic terms, fake and artificial with all its treacle, this song demonstrates how far the local celebrities are not only from the doctors’ problems, but also from real life in general. The video clip aggravates this impression. Here, the celebrities, setting an example of compliance with the lockdown regime, appear in their home environment. However, the interiors of their homes with marble staircases, white grand pianos and their own recording studios look cynical contrast to the documentary footage from the same video clip showing weary doctors, with dark rings under their eyes, leaning against grey tiled walls. It is quite natural that the song and the music video caused the opposite effect, generating a wave of indignation among YouTube users. In their comments, they denounced the artists in hypocrisy, social cynicism, the attempt to take advantage of someone else’s trouble while doing absolutely nothing in terms of real support and assistance to doctors.

Another song “Mikhail Lebedev” by “Arcady Kots”, which was named in honor of the doctor who deceased from coronavirus, sounds much more truthful, without false sentiments. To the accompaniment of dry guitar beating and howls of a harmonica imitating a siren, the band’s lead singer Kirill Medvedev chants a biting verdict: “*An ambulance is coming, an ambulance is coming / Who will get there sooner, you or me? / They don’t care about them, they don’t care about us / And about you, doctors, forty thousand times. / Repeat the chorus forty thousand times: Mikhail Lebedev*”. Instead of abstract words about gratitude to doctors, there is a disappointing diagnosis to the entire system, in which, despite the doom, doctors continue

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<sup>9</sup> Information from the song release on YouTube video hosting. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mw7iSQMWvkQ>.

to do their job and show everyday heroism. Photos of Russian doctors who died from coronavirus – the most ordinary people, in the most ordinary, routine environment – were used for the song video. Not a single photo repeats during the almost six-minute clip. The fact that all those people died saving other people's lives has a striking effect. The cost of the profession becomes more evident than ever before.

Thus, like any other truly extreme situation, the pandemic worked like an X-ray, so both the artists and the audience found themselves out of their quiet scheduled lives, face to face with problems which did not appear yesterday, but which became apparent today. The artistic community was divided into those who were ready to admit the seriousness of the situation and share responsibility for what was happening, and those whose heads were still in the clouds of entertainment content. However, the audience is very sensitive to this kind of deafness, so now the sterile world of glamor looks as illusory and fake as never before. The coronavirus, albeit for a while, has dramatically changed the requirements for the entire show business industry.

### **“I want quarantine with you”: strategies for romantic relationships**

The pandemic has modified not only songs related to acute social issues, but also those about love, providing several relatively new plot lines at once. Interestingly, the same circumstances are used by lyrical characters in completely different ways – either to improve their relations or to end them.

One of the popular leitmotifs of romantic songs was understanding of quarantine and lockdown regime as unaccounted time for love. Some characters pretend to have been long dreaming of such privacy. For example, in the song **“Let's stay at home”** by Olga Buzova, she goes into voluntary retreat for two:

*“Let's stay in, let's close all the doors, / By the light of neon in our atmosphere, / And we have nowhere to run, nowhere to rush, / I just want to live with you alone”.*  
Other characters, on the contrary, suffer from an unexpected plenty of time at their disposal with no idea what to do with it: *“Day ten: you ate again, I lay down again”.*



As a result, the characters of the song “Quarantine” by Timur Rodriguez spend days reading books (*“For the first time, “War and Peace” has been read from cover to cover, including battle scenes”*), experimenting with cooking (*“At least now we know how to cook smoothies, shashlik and gingerbread from buckwheat”*) and voraciously having sex (*“Let the windowsill, floor, bed and carpet burn beneath us”*).

At the time of quarantine, some lovers, on the contrary, find themselves separated from each other: *“There is quarantine between us, / I stay at home alone, / There is the Internet between us, / But it’s no problem”* (“Quarantine” by CMH<sup>10</sup>). But even more often, quarantine becomes a vivid metaphor for a difficult period of relationships. With the help of epidemiological terms and related accessories, a new phraseology of love is built. Taking a break in a relationship is now fashionably called quarantine, and a mask means not so much medical protection as psychological one that is supposed to hide our true feelings. These are the tropes that Kartashov (Dmitry Kartashov) the singer and “Kiss-Kiss” band both separately used in their compositions with the same name “Quarantine”. In the first case, we can see the suffering of a jealous guy (*“Well \*\*\* [why] you need a mask, / Be real, be nice / If you have someone else, let me know, / I’ll understand it all – not an idiot – I will leave you and go to quarantine”*). In the second case, it is a young student who finds herself in a similar situation of “self-isolation” from her annoying lover (*“It feels like a virus in my heart, / I’m all alone and so are you, / There are no pluses, only minuses, / I go to quarantine. / A medical mask on my face, / Epidemic of lies, / No infection will pass, / There is no disease worse than you”*). These lyrical characters are not likely to take the pandemic seriously. On the contrary, they escape from the problems of the big world, completely immersed in their current personal feelings. The quarantine vocabulary here only serves the purpose of refreshing the standard schemes of love lyrics, making the song sound immediately relevant and spectacularly playing upon the perennial conflicts.

Another well-established leitmotif of modern pop songs, experiencing a surge of popularity during the pandemic, is associated with the theme

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<sup>10</sup> CrazyMegaHell (abbreviated CMH; real name - Ruslan Sergeevich Tushentsov) - “Russian video blogger and rap artist. One of the most influential video bloggers of the Russian Internet, according to RIAB. For more information, see: <http://cyclowiki.org/wiki/Crazy-MegaHell>

of love as a disease. It partly sounds in the above-mentioned song by “Kiss-Kiss” (*“There is no disease worse than you”*). It is also exploited in the recent singles by such longtime celebrities as Elena Terleeva and Polygraph Sharikov. Elena Terleeva releases a song with a hype name “Virus”, but compares her attachment to her counterpart with a little-known disease, which apparently attracted attention due to its phonetic ambivalence (*“Like the Ebola virus, I was Ebola, / I wouldn’t like to be in love with you and to be sick with you”*). Polygraph Sharikov goes even further in his desire to play on the “hot” topic and calls his new track even more specifically – “Coronavirus”. The story of the song, however, comes down to the torments of love “for three”, so the pandemic turns out to be nothing more than a good way of self-promotion (*“The TV says, / There’s no disease worse than coronavirus. / And who invented love disease, / And what shall I do about it now?”*).

Thus, it can be stated that, in fact, romantic songs proved to be helpless in the face of the pandemic. So far, they have not been able to truly reflect on or, at least, qualitatively absorb the quarantine theme into their stories. At best, they wittily describe the changes in our everyday relationships (Timur Rodriguez) or use the lockdown regime as a fashionable dramatic conflict (CMH, Kartashov, Kiss-Kiss). However, exploiting a highly relevant theme does not often really enrich the content of the songs. It rather makes them only superficially consonant with the time.

In this respect, the example of the duet Gidayyat (Gidayat Abbasov) – Gazan (Emir Gasanov) is very indicative. In mid-February 2020, they presented a song with the provocative name “Coronaminus”. In the official release of the composition, the authors described it as a story “about a sharp and global exacerbation of arrogance among girls”. It is obvious, though, that the authors phonetically played on the name of the virus to use it to their advantage. This track as another example of the “eastern invasion” on the Russian stage<sup>11</sup>, has a distinctive style. The lyrical character of the song is an alpha male. He idiomatically describes the object of his desire: *“She is a bomb, she is a bomb, / This girl is an anaconda. <...> She’s perfect, but*

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<sup>11</sup> Over the last year, several performers with very strong oriental motifs in style have topped charts in Russia. They are "GAYAZOV \$ BROTHER \$" with the song "Take me to a Deep House Party", Agunda and "Taipan" band with the song "The Moon does not Know the Way" and Super Zhorik (Mikhail Galustyan) with his track "Gold".

*there is one minus, / Corona is her minus*". As stilted tropes here they use erotic dances ("*Come on, move what you got from your mother*"), a comparison of a woman with a drug ("I'm rolling you, / This night, you are my Mary Jane<sup>12</sup>") and a blend of oriental motifs ("*I wandered looking for your smell, / On the hot quicksand*"). The music of the song is also distinguished by strong oriental intonations, the lead singer's low brutal voice and an extremely aggressive presentation style.

Unlike most of the "quarantine" songs, this track openly exploits the sensitive topic without responding in any way to the very problem of the pandemic. We can long debate the ethics of such an approach, but the impressive popularity of this track<sup>13</sup> itself becomes a diagnosis of the current situation. Like ancient rituals, it encourages the audience to dance the threat out, and to have their own "feast in the time of plague".

#### **"Buckwheat, Martini, we're in quarantine": carnival every day**

With all the immersion of modern pop music in routine processes, before the lockdown regime, it was rare to see the signs of everyday life in the lyrics of pop songs. The technique was often used to indicate the contrast between the sublimity of the lyrical character's feelings and the mediocrity of the environment. At the same time, the opposition of love and everyday life could be presented both seriously and in an ironic manner.

With the beginning of the quarantine, household details and specific signs of the time invade even the most romantic tracks. They play in every possible manner with the odious queues in supermarkets, the purchase of toilet paper and buckwheat, as well as travel restrictions associated with the need to comply with the lockdown regime.

The song characters take the new precautions differently. Some of them attempt to turn this into a game. For example, they make a trip to the store look like a masquerade with many related accessories ("*A hood, raids by masked police, / Sanitiser, gloves, tissues, glasses, the rest is in the first*

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<sup>12</sup> Slang word for marijuana to pass the censorship

<sup>13</sup> By September 2020, the video for this song posted on YouTube has got about 20 million views.

*aid kit*<sup>14</sup>). Meanwhile, moving around the house turns into an impromptu survival race (*“Run like Jackie Chan / From one room to another for your belongings, / Dig in the stash, no longer than an hour, / Go back and dodge the slap*<sup>15</sup>). All the characters, though, do feel uncomfortable being locked up around the clock (*“How can I keep myself from going crazy at home? Feel like a prisoner within four familiar walls*<sup>16</sup>). And the longer the quarantine lasts, the more radical ways of beating the blues the song characters invent.

Some characters agitate: *“Let’s have a barbecue in the stairwell*<sup>17</sup>, while others use improvised items to have a party – *“Buckwheat, martini, / We are in quarantine. / Barbecue forbidden, / I keep it positive”*. The quarantine condition cancels all conventions. In an emergency, nobody cares about being a gourmet. People eat the food they have available, whether it is formally compatible or not. They combine the simplest cereal and exquisite alcohol, which adds to the thrill of the current situation. Through that kind of food blending of “high” and “low”, carnival permissiveness is passed on to ordinary everyday life.

Anyway, the quarantine is perceived as a collapse of many plans. Many characters, though, do not fall into despair and try to look on the bright side of the current situation. The very “advanced” ones look even further, trying to reflect on how the quarantine is changing our attitude to life. Potap (Alexey Potapenko) was probably the one who managed to convey this feeling of uncertainty most interestingly. The character of his song “Quarantine” dreams of how familiar things, such as traveling abroad, going to bars and clubs, will return to life. While listing these things, he suddenly gives out a basically philosophical maxim: *“The world has gone crazy, time, / Checks us, our tribe - / At what depth / And where the person is in you”*. Thus, apart from a carnival laughter at the current situation, there is a distinct feeling of an upcoming catastrophe, an impending apocalypse, and the main fear is that nobody knows what people we will be like after they get out of it.

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<sup>14</sup> A line from "Quarantine" lyrics by Timur Rodriguez.

<sup>15</sup> A line from “Home” lyrics by PTP.

<sup>16</sup> A line from “Home” lyrics by PTP.

<sup>17</sup> A line from "Quarantine lyrics " by CMH.

Consequently, the pandemic has a significant impact on thematic trends in pop music. On the one hand, pop songs obviously become more household-oriented with more and more signs of everyday life in them – utilitarian trivial objects and actions, rather than abstract romantic clichés. On the other hand, pop music is trying to rise above this everyday life and see something more behind it, to feel the existential consequences of the quarantine “reset”. Sadly, so far, such cases are very rare.

### **Music: dancing fears out**

“Quarantine” pop songs reveal two paradoxes regarding the nature of music. I have already mentioned one of them, which is a pronouncedly relaxed and at times monotonous character of songs dedicated to acute social issues. There is no sound recording of protest in them. On the contrary, the music emphasizes the lyrical character's indifference to the events taking place, their humble acceptance of actually shocking facts. Given the high prevalence of such a paradox and its nontrivial effect on the listeners, it can be safely called a conscious artistic device.

The second paradox is associated with a group of songs dedicated to romantic and everyday themes. The vast majority of them are written on the basis of dance styles, or at least involve dance rhythms. Some songs are overtly danceable in nature, for example, “Pandemic” by Bianca, written in the style of rumba, or “Coronaminus” by Gidayyat – Gazan duo, based on the beats of club pop rap. Other compositions hide their dancing character behind the veil of hip-hop chanting (“Quarantine” by Rodriguez, “Home” by PTP) or chillout “nagging” rhythm (“Coronavirus” by Polygraph Sharikov, “Quarantine” by Kartashov).

Some artists find interesting ways to rhythm and vocalize the word “quarantine”. For instance, in the coda of his track, Timur Rodriguez effectively loops the word so that it turns into “quara-quarantine”. There is a play on words, and the first two syllables become an independent word “quara” («кара» in Russian), which means “retribution”. Dmitry Kartashov (Kartashov) sings this word as “quarantine-na-na-na”, which helps him to create an artificial rhyme and a catchy rhythm. Significantly, except for Gidayyat –

Gazan duo with their song “Coronaminus”, none of the performers musically play on words directly related to the disease.

Unlike music of academic traditions<sup>18</sup>, pop music basically does not develop any intonation and timbre formulas to characterize the disaster. Instead, it uses the developed formulas of trendy styles, thereby pretending that there is no disaster at all. Despite the huge audience, in terms of content, pop music ends up locked into the world of private values and throws up a party there playing music full blast.

There is only one nuance, however, that reveals some disharmony in the dance extravaganza. The fact is that all the "quarantine" tracks are written in a minor key. On the one hand, this feature could be attributed to fashion, as most modern hits tend to be in a minor key. This trend is also supported thematically, since many lyrical characters of modern pop hits would rather dance heartache out than pause for reflection. On the other hand, the continuous minor mood gives the “quarantine party” a feeling of total despair, as if the characters were unsuccessfully looking for the cherished spirit of fun.

### **Music videos: overcoming the distance**

The music videos that appeared during the lockdown regime are interesting in two aspects: 1) how they deal with quarantine attributes and 2) how the home-video genre of pop stars differs from its interpretation by their academic and rock colleagues.

Masks, toilet paper and doctors are in the lead as universal signs of the new time in the clips that appeared between March and May 2020. It is indicative that all these attributes are often placed in an absurd comic context.

Masks completely lose their protective function and are intended solely as a sign of lockdown regime. They are worn at home (“Quarantine” by CMH) and while swimming in a private pool (“Coronavirus” by Polygraph Sharikov). They are put on by backup dancers (“Coronaminus” by Gidayyat

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<sup>18</sup> About sound implementation of the catastrophe theme in academic music, see the article by Elena Petrushanskaya (2020).

– Gazan duet) and used as an intricate accessory for a stage costume (“Pandemic” by Bianca). The same as in everyday practice, a mask is worn pro forma and becomes “part of a social masquerade, a game of the new rules” (Salnikova E., 2020, p. 312). The absence of gloves in the quarantine video clips, as an attribute much less visually noticeable and more difficult to play with, proves the fact that a mask is understood only as a conspicuous accessory that marks the time.

Another popular attribute of quarantine music videos is toilet paper, which is also used for off-label purposes. Rolls of toilet paper are transformed into an impromptu telescope (“Self-isolation” by Ivan Urgant and Alexander Gudkov). They are placed around the couch like cushions, or used to build pyramids (“Quarantine” by CMH). Unwound rolls of toilet paper, like a serpentine, artistically float in the air (“Coronavirus” by Polygraph Sharikov). Finally, a shining toilet bowl becomes a simulacrum of the rolls themselves, placed as a central attribute in an enclosed space-box where a glamorous clip is filmed (“Pandemic” by Bianca).

Masks and toilet paper, placed in an inappropriate context, can be viewed as a kind of joke, an ironic game with the symbols of the new era. However, when the figure of a doctor is presented in the same vein, it produces a very ethically dubious effect. In the repeatedly mentioned video of “Quarantine” by CMH, a team of doctors in an ambulance seem to be taking the main character to a psychiatric hospital. The characters try on the role of comic idiots and even attempt to imitate the dance performed by “Little Big” band. Polygraph Sharikov introduces similar abnormal characters in white coats to his clip. In the final shots, they are picturesquely running in slow motion after the escaping main character in an attempt to put on a medical mask on him. What is more, Bianca's video comes as an outrage to all the common standards of decency. In the clip, a life-size puppet of Dr. Aibolit<sup>19</sup> participates in twerking – a sexually provocative dance actively involving buttocks movement.

Pop industry, now accustomed to working in a provocative manner, finally forgets about ethical standards. It is clear, though, that the audience does not forgive this. In their comments to the video, people make state-

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<sup>19</sup> The character of several literary works by Korney Chukovsky.

ments, sometimes in very strong terms, about inappropriateness of such abuse of those who save lives. In a situation of pandemic, contribution made by doctors becomes evident as never before, and any irony towards them appears inappropriate and is severely ostracized.

Under quarantine conditions, like all other musicians, pop artists filmed video clips in home interiors. However, the pop stars' home-videos have specific characteristics.

Firstly, there are only a few cases when we can see the process of playing music on the screen. Even if there is a person playing a musical instrument, they play music completely different from that in the video (for example, "Let's stay at home" by Olga Buzova, "Self-isolation" by Ivan Urgant and Alexander Gudkov). Perhaps the only example with musicians playing and singing in a split-screen mode what we really hear at a particular moment is Semyon Slepakov's video for his song "Viral".

Secondly, unlike academic and rock performers, pop stars actively involve their show business colleagues in their videos. Limited in terms of visual effects, the new clips rely on the number of media faces on the screen. In order to emphasize togetherness in a quarantine situation, the celebrities are ready to sacrifice the golden rule of a video clip as being a specific artist promotion.

Thirdly, pop music performers neglect another absolute rule of a music video, which is creating an aura of being select, an extraordinary personality in extraordinary circumstances, i.e. the desired stardom status. In the quarantine videos, celebrities pretend to face exactly the same problems of the lockdown regime as ordinary people do.

The main problem is the danger of going crazy in a confined space. Several music home-videos show stars suffering from idleness at home. The most illustrative example of this approach is the video entitled "Self-isolation" (cover of the song "Be My Lover" (1995) by "La Bouche") initiated by Ivan Urgant and Alexander Gudkov. Here, locked at home, celebrities sharpen "claws" instead of cats, draw caricatured self-portraits, apply face masks, eat pasta when surrounded by children going nuts, play sports, take a shower with their clothes on, knead dough, play with pets, clean their houses with mops and vacuum cleaners, etc. However, pop stars manage to



bring “creativity” even to the most ordinary activities (sports, cleaning, cosmetic procedures) – they put on elaborate outfits, demonstrate exaggerated facial expressions, and turn household items into bizarre accessories. In the new environment, this is how their creative originality is manifested; their star status is converted into such a non-trivial rethinking of trivial things and activities.

As a result, it looks like the “stars” have never been as “close to the people” as during the quarantine. It is revealed and “documented” that they, like ordinary people, wash floors, try to cook food and do not always have a perfect appearance. But in fact, this is a very misleading impression. The celebrities’ home-videos are nothing more than a game to pretend they belong here. Behind it, there is a similar feeling of tension in an attempt to imitate ease, described by Violetta Evalleau regarding the process of virtualization of museums [2020, p. 489]. What betrays the artists is not a creative approach to everyday activities, but rather their home interiors. It is obvious that there is a colossal gap between the living conditions of stars and those of ordinary people. Once again, we can see a quarantine carnival-like life with no status boundaries separating people, but this feeling is just as illusory as the temporary regime of restrictions.

### **“Crying at a Techno Party”: reasons for chart luck**

Obviously, the songs written at the time of the quarantine are only part of modern pop music that users listened to during the lockdown regime. Yandex. Music streaming service provided various media with statistical data, according to which, in general, during the quarantine, the number of listens on the service remained the same. On weekdays, it fluctuates at “around 90 minutes and decreases slightly at the weekend<sup>20</sup>.” At the same time, “Russians have played songs about the virus and self-isolation more than 4 million times. Music for workouts has also become especially popular – dynamic songs were requested more often than songs for parties”<sup>21</sup>. Similar observations were provided by another streaming service “Sound”.

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<sup>20</sup> Obnosov A. It was revealed what kind of music Russians listen to in quarantine // Gazeta.Ru. 04/02/2020. URL: [https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2020/04/02/a\\_13033933.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2020/04/02/a_13033933.shtml) Date of treatment - 06/28/2020

According to its data, “users now [mid-April 2020] prefer rhythmic, high-performance pop music that is suitable for exercise and stress relief, as well as relaxing meditation tracks”.<sup>22</sup>

However, the figures from Yandex-Music Top-100 chart partly contradict the general statistics. Among the songs that topped the chart throughout the quarantine were a few clearly dance “party” tracks, for example, “UNO” and “Hypnodancer” by “Little Big” band, as well as the composition “Crying at a Techno Party” by “Cream Coda”. This song was originally composed and recorded by “Khleb” band in 2017, and there is not a single word about quarantine in it. Nevertheless, throughout the entire period of self-isolation, this track remained at the top position not only on the Yandex Music chart, but also in the ratings of such social networks as “VKontakte” and “Tik-tok”. Within three months since the release of the music video, it gained 25 million views on YouTube. In other words, this song can be safely called the main music symbol of the quarantine. How exactly did this relatively old song echo in modern times?

In the original version of this song by “Khleb”, it is sung by a guy who comes to a techno party and sees his ex-girlfriend with another man. However, according to the style of music, it was not a techno composition, but rather a parody of sentimental pop hits of the 1990s with elements of techno stylization. Generally speaking, at that time the song was a nostalgic homage to the hits of such Russian boy bands as “Ruki Vverkh” and “Ivanushki International”.

In the version by “Cream Coda”, it is a girl who sings the song. Consequently, the melodramatic plot loses its obvious irony, as well as a pitiful tone in music. The character is overwhelmed by sincere feelings of a failed romance (*“I’m crying at a techno party, I’m crying at a techno party, / You are not with me, tears are falling at the rave”*). She describes simple everyday joys that never happened (*“You were mine, only mine / And together we dreamed of buying something at “Kuznetsky Most”*).

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<sup>21</sup> How the lockdown regime changed music preferences of Russians // Kommersant FM, 06/05/2020. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4367120>

<sup>22</sup> Experts: Russians listen to chanson, songs about quarantine and music for sports // RIA Novosti, 13.04. URL: <https://ria.ru/20200413/1569964759.html>

It is no coincidence that those simple lines echoed precisely during the period of self-isolation. There clearly runs the theme of happiness left behind somewhere in the past, and life that will never be as carefree as it used to be. The happiness that the characters dreamed of was very simple, unpretentious and boiled down to the everyday joys of spending time together. It is the impossibility of these very simple actions that the character of the song mourns, and so do the listeners who find themselves in self-isolation. A year ago there was a completely different world, but now there is no turning back. The timeline “past-present” is very important in this song, and the present, in comparison with the past, feels absolutely hopeless. In the past, everything was rosy and clear, but a look from the present shows how easily all those plans were ruined.

From today, in the lyrics of the song, one can hear unintentional prophetic words, for example, “*they closed the Outline again*”. The name of the cancelled electronic music festival has become a symbol of the widespread closure of all public gathering places.

The new music solution proposed by “Cream Coda” plays an important role in creating the feeling of impending doom. The ripple of the composition is shifted to a weak beat and gets back to normal only in the chorus, which creates a feeling of instability and uncertainty. Similarly, the end of the song “hangs” on the third step of a minor tonic and becomes a kind of “exit to nowhere”.

Like most of the “quarantine” songs, however, the entire “tragic” complex of artistic and expressive means here is “packed” in dance rhythms. It means that they are trying to dance the pain out again. This is exactly what happens in the music video filmed the day before the official announcement of the lockdown regime. In this video, some modern dancers and showmen from TNT TV channel, all dressed in fabulous outfits, perform infectious dance moves, each on a separate tiny balcony of a new building.

Based on the video, a flash mob with dancing on the balcony started. It became extremely popular on Tik-Tok social network. People tried on unusual outfits, involved their pets in dancing and did not hesitate to demonstrate their not always perfect body skills. As in the case with the “Isolation” flash mob, in such a creative emancipation, one could observe “the

deformation of a human body, the change in its shape, the transformation of the male into the female and vice versa, the mixture of animals and anthropomorphic features; the principle of reducing and ridiculing the drama of the quarantine situation” (Yurgeneva, 2020, p. 636), i.e. characteristic components of “carnival” timelessness. Thus, ordinary people in a confined space tried to brighten up their absolutely routine pastime through creative self-expression.

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Now it is too early to assess the result of how the pandemic has affected the development of pop music. Some of the phenomena described in this article will be definitely added to the existing array of techniques in the show industry. Meanwhile, some of them will apparently remain exclusively a sign of a specific period of restrictions. Nevertheless, some patterns are already evident today.

First of all, the quarantine has demonstrated the immediate flexibility of modern pop industry, ready to respond to the topic of the day in a flash. Clearly, the songs do not always really capture the essence of the problem. Very often they only play on fashionable cliché and deftly rhyme signs of the new time. However, as in the case with, for example, bard and rock music, the social crisis provokes musicians to make deep, insightful and hard-hitting statements about the processes taking place in Russian society today.

However, we must admit that the majority of listeners turned to pop music not for answers to insoluble questions, but rather for emotional and physical "pain relief" from the regime of the unknown. It is no coincidence that most of the "quarantine" tracks have a dance basis. As a result, they performed an important therapeutic mission, which was to allow people to creatively express themselves and turn the quarantine regime into a kind of “carnival” timelessness.

As regards music video industry, in my opinion, the quarantine will not bring any significant aesthetic changes to it. The celebrities’ home-videos are most likely to remain a sign of a specific time, while mainstream

music video makers will continue to create “polished” ideal settings for ideal characters, which is demonstrated by YouTube post-quarantine practice

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