

*Abstract*

# Symphony of Silence: The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Philharmonic Bands in Portugal <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** Philharmonic bands constitute a vital element of Portuguese culture, playing a central role in cultural dynamism, particularly in the country's peripheral spaces. The central objective of this exploratory study is to analyse the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Portuguese philharmonic bands. To this end, a questionnaire was created and distributed among philharmonic bands in Portugal, and so far, 350 responses have been obtained. The first results reveal enormous challenges for the survival of these associations given the withdrawal of a significant number of members, who are now disengaged and unmotivated, which is reflected in the associations' performance, recruitment and financial stability. The results also highlight the strong need for institutional support and new strategies for the sustainability and continuity of these associations.

**Keywords:** cultural sector; philharmonic bands; COVID-19; impacts; Portugal

## 1. Introduction

Philharmonics bands are a vital element of Portugal's cultural landscape, playing a central role in boosting cultural initiatives. Their influence on the communities in which they operate is profound, not only due to the variety of activities they promote and make available to the public but also due to their educational role over the centuries [1–4]. Furthermore, they enrich the social and cultural fabric of localities, fostering interaction and social relations between their members [5–8], and are therefore a crucial element of social cohesion in rural areas [9].

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for diverse sectors of society, including cultural and social institutions such as marching bands. In Portugal, these bands are deeply rooted in the musical, educational, cultural and ethnographic landscape [10–12], contributing significantly to the dynamism of local communities, especially in rural areas [13]. This exploratory and unprecedented study aims to understand the pandemic's fundamental social, technical–musical and economic impacts on Portuguese philharmonic bands. By examining these results, we can identify the key areas that call for support and propose strategies to ensure the sustainability of these cultural institutions, which often represent the only cultural and social pillar of localities in the interior of the country, generating a cultural dynamic in settlements which, without them, lose much of their cultural and recreational dynamism [14].

These associations are an impressive element of organising Portuguese society [14]; with the pandemic, they were forced to stop their activity between March 2020 and the



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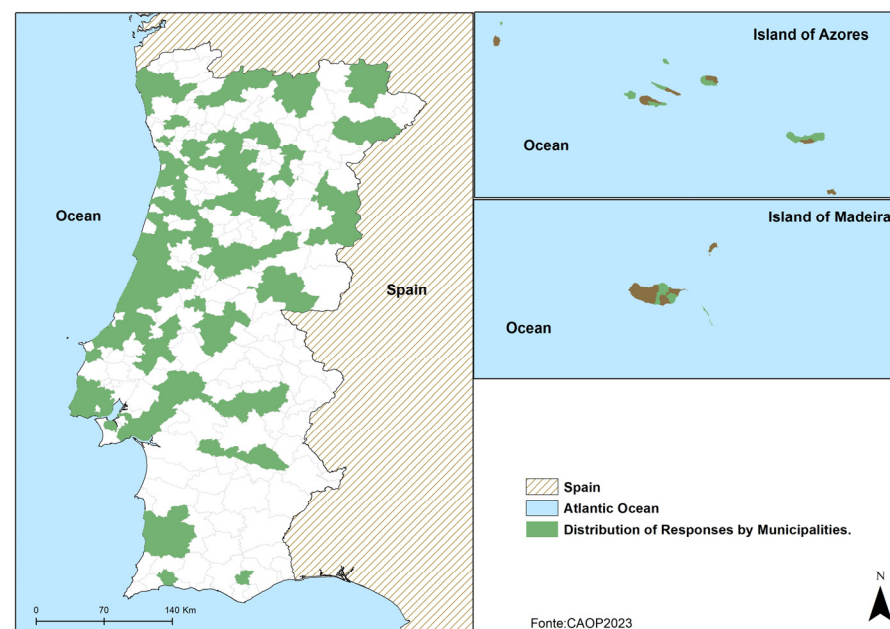
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second half of 2021. This total stop in activity was a serious problem from the point of view of the financial sustainability of the associations, as they found themselves unable to participate in traditional pilgrimages, their primary source of income. In this context, from an economic point of view, multiple problems emerged in numerous associations, or pre-existing ones worsened, as in many cases, public support was reduced and insufficient. In addition to this problem, there are others related to sociability given the lack of interest of some musicians in returning after an interruption of almost three years. Thus, many associations also face problems from a human resources point of view, with the shutdown caused by the pandemic allowing them to cut from or “bond” with the institution.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This exploratory investigation was based on applying a semi-structured online questionnaire aimed at philharmonic bands in Portuguese territory after evaluating two philharmonic bands to improve the survey. The questionnaire addressed three fundamental areas: social impacts (participation, social interactions and the recruitment of new members), musical and artistic impacts (quality of performances, adaptation to new rehearsal and performance formats) and economic and financial impacts (financial stability, dependence on institutional support and financing strategies). The questions were structured to cover distinct roles within associations, such as musicians, leaders and conductors, to capture a broad and diverse view of the effects of the pandemic. The questionnaire was distributed to all bands in Portugal, resulting in 350 responses. The data collection process ensured representation of the country’s different regions (Figure 1), in addition to allowing a comprehensive territorial analysis of the effects of the pandemic. The questionnaire, in a mixed approach, included several multiple school questions and open-ended questions, thus allowing data related to the complexity of the problems to be obtained.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of responses by municipalities (source: authors).

## 3. Results and Discussion

Although the questionnaire is comprehensive, only a few results, the most significant ones, are analysed in this article. Thus, the responses correspond to 51.1% (N = 179) from musicians, 40.6% (N = 142) from association directors and 8.3% (N = 29) from conductors.

The geographical distribution covers the mainland and islands of Portugal (Azores and Madeira), exceeding a hundred municipalities.

### *3.1. The Social Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Philharmonic Bands*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on marching band member participation. Of the respondents, 309 (88.3%) agree that the pandemic negatively affected the participation of musicians. However, 41 (11.7%) totally or partially disagree with this statement. Regarding re-recruiting new musicians, 95 respondents (27.1%) agreed that the pandemic made this process difficult, and 93 (26.6%) partially agreed. Only 49 (14%) disagreed, and 14 (4%) totally disagreed.

Regarding the social interactions between band members, 96 respondents (27.4%) agreed that there were substantial changes, while 85 (24.3%) agreed that the changes were partial. Only 32 (9.1%) disagreed, and 39 (11.1%) totally disagreed. The withdrawal of members during the pandemic was confirmed by 80 respondents (22.9%) who fully agreed and 95 (27.2%) who partially agreed. Only 64 (18.3%) disagreed, and 25 (7.2%) totally disagreed. Thus, it is confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted Portuguese philharmonic bands, affecting participation, the recruitment of new musicians, social interactions and the adaptation of new members.

### *3.2. The Musical and Artistic (Technical) Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Philharmonic Bands*

The pandemic significantly affected the quality of artistic works, particularly in the preservation of performance standards, due to health restrictions, which resulted, for example, in a lack of rehearsals. Consequently, there was a drop in the musicality and cohesion of the groups. In fact, 21.1% (N = 74) of those interviewed positively agreed that their quality was greatly affected. In comparison, 18.9% (N = 66) stated that it was greatly affected, and 5.4% (N = 19) completely agreed that the pandemic affected the artistic quality of their association. In turn, 20.9% (N = 73) reasonably disagreed on this issue, another 20.9% (N = 73) stated that their bandwidth was little affected, and only 12.9% (N = 45) of those interviewed said that the pandemic did not affect their artistic quality in any way. Regarding the mandatory cancellation of events, the results showed that 43.7% (N = 153) of the respondents confirmed that many events were postponed or cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions, for 28.3% (N = 99), all of them were cancelled, and 14% (N = 49) indicated that some events were cancelled. In comparison, 14% (N = 49) reported that few events were affected. These cancellations have not only harmed the bands' musical performance but also their financial stability, as events are crucial sources of revenue.

The data analysis reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially impacted marching bands, affecting their artistic qualities. Continuous support strategies that allow them to resume their creative and cultural activities fully should be initiated.

### *3.3. The Economic and Financial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Philharmonic Bands*

Concerning the financial sustainability of philharmonic bands, the results demonstrate that despite them suspending activities, the majority were not at risk of closing their activities, at 70.3% (N = 246). However, 13.1% (N = 46) felt this risk. The rest were unable to answer this question, at 16.6% (N = 58). The aim was also to ascertain the financial difficulties these institutions faced due to the pandemic. The results demonstrate that it was difficult for them to pay off their expenses since there were no sources of income for 54.7% (N = 192) of those surveyed. On the other hand, around 32.6% (N = 114) of them considered that the difficulties in paying expenses during this period increased the financial fragility of their bands.

## 4. Conclusions

The present study demonstrates that Portuguese philharmonic bands faced notable challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting member participation, recruitment, artistic quality and the financial stability of these associations. Institutional support and the development of new financing mechanisms are crucial to these cultural institutions' survival and continued growth. Recognition of the importance of marching bands is required, as they are cultural pillars and inducers of social inclusion and community dynamism, especially in rural, more peripheral spaces.

To ensure the sustainability of marching bands, it is essential to implement public policies that provide financial, continuous and consistent support to these associations. This includes creating specific financing lines for cultural activities, promoting musical training programmes and encouraging collaboration between bands and other cultural institutions. Population participation also needs to be increased by instituting awareness campaigns, community events and volunteer programmes, strengthening the ties between the bands and the community and supporting each other. Furthermore, the integration of young musicians and the diversification of activities offered by marching bands can attract new members and guarantee the continuity of the musical traditions of this intangible heritage.

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