IASPM JOURNAL
ISSN 2079 - 3871

Insiders' Perspectives on Democratisation of Classical Music Production

Emre Ekici
University of Otago
mrekici@alumni.bilkent.edu.tr

Abstract

This study employs inductive thematic analysis to examine democratisation in music production—making resources and knowledge more accessible—by comparing classical (CMP) and popular music production (PMP). PMP embraces technological innovations, fostering decentralised tools and platforms for diverse creators. CMP, however, prioritises fidelity to live performance and historical conventions, resisting democratisation due to institutional conservatism and entrenched power dynamics. Using data from 34 qualitative interviews with professionals, the study highlights how educational, institutional, and technical factors slow CMP's adaptation to technology. While the democratisation of CMP would require cultural shifts and educational reforms, the adoption of select PMP innovations might enhance accessibility without compromising CMP's traditional values. This research contributes to the underexplored intersection of democratisation and CMP practice. The paper suggests that through implementing hybrid approaches inspired by PMP, CMP could evolve to create more flexible and creative production environments while preserving its rich heritage.

KEYWORDS: democratisation in classical music production, resistance to democratisation, popular vs. classical music production, impact of technology on music genres, recording studios

Introduction

The democratisation of music production—a process by which tools, knowledge, and creative agency become increasingly accessible beyond traditional gatekeepers—has transformed creative industries over the past three decades. In popular music production (PMP), this shift is exemplified by the proliferation of affordable digital tools, decentralised platforms, and self-taught creators, fostering a culture of experimentation and inclusivity (Alleyne 2020: 19). However, this democratisation is not absolute; while entry barriers have lowered, high-level professional PMP continues to rely on exclusive resources, such as acoustically treated environments and premium analogue hardware. Yet in classical music production (CMP), the process of democratisation remains slower, constrained by institutional hierarchies, reverence for live performance, and a cultural ethos that equates technological adoption with compromised tradition. This divergence raises urgent questions: Why has CMP tended to resist democratising forces that PMP more readily absorbs? How do technological advancements, while seemingly neutral, interact with entrenched power dynamics to shape creative practices in these distinct contexts of practice?

Technological advancements are often framed as primary drivers of democratisation, lowering barriers to entry through innovations like digital audio workstations (DAWs) (Théberge 1997: 73). Scholars like Taylor (2001: 17) argue that such tools democratise by redistributing technical capital—the knowledge and resources required to produce music—to non-specialists. However, scholars caution against deterministic narratives: technology does not unilaterally democratise but interacts with social, cultural, and institutional systems to enable—or constrain—access. Zagorski-Thomas (2014) theorises this interplay through the lens of social construction of technology and embodied cognition, arguing that tools are not passive enablers but are shaped by—and shape—human practices, power structures, and cultural values. Therefore, democratisation is not a direct result of technological progress, but a complex process shaped by specific circumstances.

The contrast between CMP and PMP illustrates this tension. PMP tends to thrive in democratised ecosystems: YouTube tutorials increasingly challenge or supplement formal pedagogy, bedroom producers rival studio-engineered hits, and algorithmic tools redefine compositional authorship (Leyshon 2009: 1321; Rogers et al. 2023). In CMP, however, technological adoption is frequently viewed as antithetical to tradition. The field's emphasis on live performance, acoustic fidelity, and institutional validation—for example, conservatory-trained performers, legacy recording labels (Leech-Wilkinson 2020)—often creates resistance to decentralised production models.

Technology's democratising potential in CMP is further complicated by structural inequities, which are perhaps best understood through the lens of genre. As scholars such as Hesmondhalgh (1999: 35) and Negus (1999: 17) argue, genres are not merely aesthetic categories but institutional cultures that enforce distinct conventions and expectations. These conventions fundamentally shape learning pathways in both formal and informal spheres (Brackett 2016: 4). In CMP, genre expectations prioritise fidelity and historical continuity, necessitating rigid, formal pedagogical frameworks that often restrict access to those trained in elite institutions

(Bennett et al. 2008: 11). Conversely, the genre conventions of PMP have historically embraced informal, community-led learning trajectories (Lena 2012: 3), creating a culture where "amateur" innovation is less stigmatised. This dichotomy underscores that technologies are not neutral "equalisers" (Zagorski-Thomas 2014: 42), but are instead deployed within specific genre ecosystems that either reinforce or disrupt existing power relations depending on their institutional roots.

While numerous advancements and milestones have shaped independent music production, their applications are more pertinent to PMP. Developments such as the expansion of sound recording programmes offered by post-secondary and private institutions (McNally and Seay 2020: 237), the reduced cost of all-in-one devices and software (Burgess 2013: 34), and the decline of large, actively operating studios (Watson 2014) appear less relevant to the democratisation of CMP. However, CMP is not entirely insulated from these shifts; economic pressures have increasingly migrated post-production tasks into home environments, while a growing "bedroom classical" culture is emerging in contemporary composition through hybrid workflows and virtual orchestration.

The existing literature suggests that the context for CMP is complex and undergirded by historical tensions around power dynamics, which particularly impact its stance against technological innovations. Although the democratisation of PMP had significant attention in the literature, the relationship between this concept and the classical music context has been mostly neglected. Put differently, I suggest that democratisation as a phenomenon of accessibility in CMP has been less fully realised and this study aims to explore this by taking insights from democratisation of PMP.

Research objectives

The main research aims are to understand the scope of democratisation in CMP and PMP, investigate the resistance to democratisation within CMP, and provide comparative insights from PMP to inform the classical music context. While numerous studies have examined democratisation in PMP, there are very few discussions of how democratisation impacts CMP in the practice. I suggest that it is possible to view the recent history of technological change in PMP as a partial blueprint for how CMP production may be democratised in the coming years.

Justification, significance, and contribution

As noted by Zagorski-Thomas (2007), PMP often blends the roles of composition, performance, and mixing into a fluid, technology-centred, and non-linear process. This approach, deeply rooted in the informal learning practices described by Green (2002: 7) enables "hyphenated" musicians to cultivate diverse skill sets and adaptable workflows (for example, Anthony 2017; Wolfe 2023). In contrast, classical music production typically adheres to a linear progression—spanning composition, performance, recording, editing, mixing, mastering, and release—while maintaining clear distinctions between the roles of performer and producer. Over the past 70 years, popular music has embraced technological tools as a core part of its creative and aesthetic practices, a shift further accelerated by the platformisation of cultural production where social media incentivises self-

sufficiency. Conversely, classical music production remains rooted in its traditional values and methodologies, often rigorously upheld by "gatekeepers" (Leech-Wilkinson 2020). The reasons underlying these contrasting approaches in different production contexts remain an underexplored area in the existing literature.

Despite the extensive literature on the democratisation of PMP, there is limited research on how CMP adapts to or struggles with integrating technological advancements commonly associated with PMP. This gap underscores the need to examine professionals' insights into whether and how democratisation is manifested in modern CMP practice, and how PMP might offer a model for democratisation within the CMP context.

To critically examine this gap, this study situates these production practices within a broader sociological framework. Resistance to democratisation in CMP is not merely technical but structural; drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of cultural capital and habitus, the rigid demarcation of roles in CMP can be understood as a mechanism for preserving institutional prestige and distinction. Furthermore, as Born and Devine (2015: 167) note, access to music technology and education is deeply shaped by class, gender, and race; thus, the "gatekeeping" observed in CMP may function to protect historical power dynamics under the guise of maintaining acoustic standards.

This study further contributes to the theoretical understanding of production by engaging with Auslander's (2008) concept of liveness. While PMP often treats the recording as a constructed artifact, CMP's adherence to the "linear progression" reflects a sense of commitment to capturing a live event, complicating the adoption of decentralised, non-linear workflows. Finally, by contrasting the educational pathways of these genres, this research highlights the political economy of digital platforms (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2019: 10), questioning whether the "democratised" tools of PMP are truly neutral or if they structurally favour short-form, pop-centric creation, thereby marginalising the complex, long-form workflows inherent to classical music.

Method

This research employs a qualitative methodology to investigate the lived experiences and production values of professional musicians and engineers. Given the study's focus on "insider perspectives" regarding democratisation—a complex social and technical phenomenon—qualitative inquiry is essential for uncovering the tacit knowledge, cultural values, and institutional pressures that shape decision-making in CMP. This approach allows for an exploration of the reasoning behind production choices to better understand the social and aesthetic dynamics of the recording studio.

The study included 34 professionals from the music industry, spanning eight countries across four continents. Participants were recruited through a combination of the researcher's established professional practice within the industry and snowball sampling, where initial participants recommended qualified colleagues. This approach ensured a diverse sample of practitioners ranging from independent freelancers to those embedded in major institutional contexts. Participants (1), comprising producers, recording engineers, composers, and performers, ranged in

age from 27 to 73 years (Median = 56.5; SD = 12.79) and had an average of 29 years of industry experience (SD = 14.24, range = 4 to 55 years). Collectively, they reported involvement in over 18,000 recording sessions. Participants were selected purposively to ensure a wide range of perspectives and experiences within the industry.

Data was gathered through semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in English between December 2023 and September 2024. The interviews were in an average duration of 01:14:23 (hh:mm:ss). Due to the global distribution of the participants, 25 interviews were conducted remotely via video conferencing platforms, while 9 were conducted in person. To ensure the data accuracy, the researcher manually transcribed all 34 interviews verbatim.

Data analysis

This research employs inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to explore democratisation in classical music production. This approach allows patterns and themes to emerge directly from the data without relying on pre-existing theoretical frameworks. A constant comparative method was utilised throughout the process, enabling critical data examination, systematic comparison of findings, and minor refinements to interview questions as needed.

To ensure methodological rigour and mitigate individual researcher bias, the coding process involved a collaborative review with two experienced colleagues. First, an independent researcher with advanced expertise in thematic analysis and qualitative methodology reviewed the coding structure and process. Second, a specialist in popular music production assisted in refining the themes based on the literature, providing a critical comparative lens to ensure the analysis remained balanced between CMP and PMP frameworks.

The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. First, data were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity. Second, key features were systematically identified across the dataset, with general codes noted in the transcript margins. Third, these initial codes were reviewed by other researchers and grouped into overarching themes. Fourth, the arrangement of themes and sub-themes was refined, ensuring that the coded data were accurately labelled. Fifth, precise definitions were developed for each label to clarify the themes. Finally, significant excerpts were selected and connected to the research questions and relevant literature. To enhance credibility, the methodology and procedures were reviewed by two academic colleagues for accuracy and consistency.

Reflexivity

While previous scholarship has suggested that technical discourse can sometimes function as a form of "elite signalling" or gatekeeping (for example, name-dropping specific equipment or institutions), this study found the contrary. Despite a rigorous question pool of approximately 75 items, participants did not appear to use specialised language to exclude the researcher or perform status. Instead, the detailed referencing of specific tools and techniques was interpreted as a willingness to share tacit knowledge. Participants largely expressed appreciation

that their specialisation was being academically recognised, treating the interview as an opportunity to contribute to the democratisation of the field rather than to guard its borders.

Results

Three themes were generated from the analysis: 1) structure and continuity, 2) physical location and mediation, and 3) accessibility. The themes generated from the interview data and example quotations can be found in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Generated Themes and Example Quotations in "Insider's Perspectives on Democratisation of Classical Music Production"

THEMES	EXAMPLE QUOTATIONS
Structure and continuity	What I offer now basically is my expertise. That is, as a recording engineer and my understanding of microphones, but also my aesthetic and my experience in music and in general. So, I can come to recording sessions as a strong musician with a strong knowledge of repertoire. But also know where to put the microphones and how to balance them. Not everyone with a laptop can do that. (King 2024).
Physical location and mediation	Physical capacity matters for the democratisation of music production. It is possible for popular music production to happen in a bedroom, but it is already difficult to bring that many people into the same room. Being in the same room and playing together has not changed for classical music and is unlikely to change. (McKeich 2024).
Accessibility	I think that the main difference that separates the classical world from all the other genres is score reading. But the reason why you rarely see pop producers working in classical is because they often do not, cannot, or want to read scores, or they do not have that training, or they are rusty or whatever. Because it is such an important part of classical production, I think it has almost made this barrier. (Buttner-Schnirer 2024).

Theme 1 – Structure and continuity

The classical music production exemplifies a measured resistance to democratisation, favouring continuity, expertise, and the preservation of established hierarchies to maintain artistic and technical standards. This process is rooted in structured workflows, defined roles, and a hierarchy that prioritises efficiency and artistic integrity. While democratisation offers greater accessibility and autonomy in other music genres, the collaborative demands of large-scale orchestral projects and the tradition of specialised roles present resistance to this shift.

Will Howie (producer/engineer) noted that there is little desire to democratise classical music production:

> I think that there seems to be some general understanding in classical music that it is not possible to make a good classical recording by yourself with very specific exceptions (…). Classical music in and of itself is this sort of like a continuum. Performance practices and the way it is taught are also similar. I do not mean that in a bad sense. I think that the way that [classical] music is engineered and produced has also become a kind of continuum. Aesthetically, things do not change that much over time. (Howie 2023).

When discussing the producer's role in classical music production, Kenneth Young (producer) emphasised the importance of placing the creator of the piece and their music at the top of the hierarchy:

> Always [prioritise] artists. It is never about me. I just enjoy the process. I was grateful to be able to produce it. It is not about me at all. It is about the music. Number one, are we serving the music? Number two, are we serving the artists and what they are trying to do? So, enable them to facilitate the process so that they can do something that they are proud of. Whatever that takes, and the composer has been served by. (Young 2024).

Supporting this, Anthony Ritchie (composer) mentioned the challenges of not having a hierarchy in the classical recording sessions:

> I think there is still a bit of a hierarchy. I think the conductor and producer, in a way, must have the agency to run things. Because it is more efficient that way. If everyone has a say all the time, it could take too long. That is the only trouble. (Ritchie 2024).

Nick Squire (recording engineer) also agreed that "[t]he problem with democracy is that it does not apply to large-scale orchestras" (Squire 2024). However, this structure does not necessarily mean that individuals should be out of the production decisions. Ritchie indicated how he places himself in the production decisions as a composer:

> I am happy to be slightly subservient to the producer. But having said that, I feel generally happy with the amount of say I have and what others have. I think it is important that the players have felt that they are able to point out that they did not play something as well as they could have (…). So, if we are doing a take of a section, say there is a clarinet solo, and the conductor is happy with it, and the producer thinks it is okay. But the soloists themselves, and I have had this experience, they come up to me in the break, and they said, 'Look, do you mind if we do that one again? Because I scuffed this note.' I might not even be able to hear that, but from their point of view, they want another chance. I think that it is important that occasionally, the players themselves have the agency to instigate a retake. It [the division of roles and the degree of influence associated with each] has to be proportionate because you cannot stop for every little minute detail. (Ritchie 2024).

Squire (recording engineer) also explained his stance on the issue: "If a soloist or principal instrument likes a specific part from a particular concert, I use it. The artist's name is on the cover" (Squire 2024). In contrast, John Neill (recording engineer) was willing to defer the production decisions to the conductor or concertmaster when disputes arose:

> [A performer] knows s/he played a wrong note. S/he will come and tell you. Some people want to be too involved. You must work with a conductor and a concertmaster to control that situation. You cannot have the harpist deciding what takes are going to be used. There are a lot of other players that play it. Not just that person. (Neill 2024).

When it comes to the separation of roles in classical contexts, Pieter Snapper (producer/recording engineer) reported:

> [Specialised roles] to me feels natural [in classical contexts]. [Hybridisation of roles] is more problematic in non-classical environments. Because very often you will be the engineer, as you will be given the responsibility to produce, but not the authority to produce [in non-classical contexts]. (Snapper 2024).

The expertise required for classical recording reinforces traditional structures, acting as a barrier that democratised tools cannot easily bypass. Unlike genres where the "laptop studio" can approximate professional results, classical production is exceptionally resource-intensive, demanding not just technical facility but an extensive form of human capital. Consequently, while digital tools may lower the economic barrier to entry, they do not alleviate the competence barrier required to capture a live ensemble. The difficulty of the task acts as a natural safeguard, protecting the genre's high standards from being diluted by shortcuts. Richard King (recording engineer) emphasises this distinction:

> What I offer now basically is my expertise. That is, as a recording engineer and my understanding of microphones, but also my aesthetic and my experience in music and in general. So, I can come to recording sessions as a strong musician with a strong knowledge of repertoire. But also know where to put the microphones and how to balance them. Not everyone with a laptop can do that. (King 2024).

Martha de Francisco (producer/recording engineer) notes the dual-edged nature of democratisation. While it allows broader participation and self-release opportunities, it diminishes traditional gatekeeping mechanisms, such as record labels, that once ensured curated quality and visibility:

> From the moment when music started to be shared over the internet, I thought there would need to be a system for listeners to differentiate between the music offerings, and to know which were of higher artistic and technical quality, and which were not. Before that, we could rely on symbols like the yellow label of Deutsche Grammophon, or the red ribbon of Philips Classics, as warrants of high quality, since their releases had already passed through various layers of artistic and quality control. The labels could be trusted to have made those decisions. But how would these be done in the age of the internet? The solution

> was easy. No decisions were required since every recording would be offered, and audiences would decide by themselves what they wish to listen to. Although labels still play a role as warrantors of quality releases, mostly online. (de Francisco 2024).

Supporting this, Seray Kalelioğlu (pianist) also emphasised how this transformation affected her perception of producing and releasing classical music:

> The advantage of democratisation is that I can self-release my music without needing a record label. However, the disadvantage is that I lose the record label's promotion and distribution channels. Democratisation, in general, caused the lessening of the meaning of some concepts such as producer, network, and distribution. In one scenario, you can make great recordings, and at the same time, your work might disappear along with thousands of other records. (Kalelioğlu 2024).

Lastly, de Francisco (producer/recording engineer) indicated a positive aspect of democratisation in classical music production:

> Just before the year 2000, I found myself wondering how there could be just two cellists under contract for the record label I was working for, Philips Classics. I realised these two artists would get to do all the recordings of the cello repertoire, but I knew at least six other cellists of equal calibre at that time; they would not get a chance to record the concertos with the label's great orchestras, because they were not under contract with us. Nowadays, in the present iteration of the music recording industry, more artists can be heard, artists of past and present, which is, in fact, a good thing. This is the part of the democratisation of music making and music consumption that I like. (de Francisco 2024).

Theme 2 - Physical location and mediation

This theme explores the critical role of physical spaces and environments in classical music production, contrasting them with the more adaptable settings of popular music. Unlike the decentralised and portable nature of popular music production, classical recording relies heavily on acoustically treated spaces to ensure critical listening and fidelity to performance. While technological advancements facilitated the democratisation of popular music production, enabling work in bedrooms and home studios, classical music retains its reliance on professional studios and collaborative, real-time ensemble performances.

Hamish McKeich (conductor) mentioned how critical space is for classical productions:

> Physical capacity matters for the democratisation of music production. It is possible for popular music production to happen in a bedroom, but it is already difficult to bring that many people into the same room. Being in the same room and playing together has not changed for classical music and is unlikely to change. (McKeich 2024).

Young (producer) agreed with how unlikely it is to achieve high-quality classical productions outside of recording studios and concert halls:

> I do not see a string quartet coming in and recording the Razumovsky quartets [Op. 59] of Beethoven anytime soon in their living room and trying to put it out over a digital platform. I do not see that that could work very well. You need someone in there listening for you. Artists need extra pairs of ears in the process. (Young 2024).

Michael Fine (producer) indicated the record labels' attitude when it comes to democratisation and physical space:

> [Democratisation] meant that you had all this digital power in your living room. It also meant that the record labels, smartly, sadly realised, 'Oh, they [producers, mixing and mastering engineers] can work from home.' We do not need to run an acoustically treated professional space for them to work. That has changed, and that is disappointing. (Fine 2024).

Snapper (producer/recording engineer) explained the bottleneck in classical productions:

> The problem [with applying democratisation concepts in popular music to classical contexts] is that real classical production requires, minimal technology and maximum listening. That is not one of those environments or systems that can translate down to, in scale to, to a bedroom, because you have to be able to listen [critically in an acoustically treated environment]. (Snapper 2024).

Supporting this, he also mentioned the relationship between post-production tools and democratisation in classical productions:

> The democratisation changed the way music production works, but classical production, less so. In fact, perhaps destructively, because people see all the pop and rock producers being able to work in their bedrooms and do the same for classical when what is critical is the listening environment for classical production. The manipulation during post-production should be minimal, obviously, and has to be done with very subtle tools. Your average stock EQ, stock limiter tends to be fairly destructive to most classical sound fields. The thing is that for a classical [production], you do not really need a whole lot of post-production tools. You just need the right ones. (Snapper 2024).

Consequently, Padraig Buttner-Schnirer (producer/recording engineer) suggests the potential for shift towards democratisation, albeit within specific, technology-driven niches through virtual instruments and self-production:

> I do feel there has been some democratisation happening, particularly in the field of contemporary composition and performance, and it will be interesting to see if this becomes more common in traditional areas of classical music. I imagine many classical musicians would enjoy the potential creative possibilities of working with virtual instruments and adding their own acoustic performance over top of it. For example, you could compose your own piece,

> let's say it features a percussion ensemble, and make a pretty good mock-up using virtual instruments or even non-traditional sounds. Then, adding your own acoustic instrument over top could sound great if you knew what you were doing. So, there is no reason why a single musician cannot already do this if they have the skills to compose, record, and program sounds. (Buttner-Schnirer 2024).

Theme 3 - Accessibility

This theme explores how accessibility impacts the democratisation of classical music production. Classical production remains distinct due to its reliance on specialised skills.

Buttner-Schnirer (producer/recording engineer) contends that the ability to read a score acts as a barrier in classical music production for individuals lacking formal training:

> One of the main differences that separates the classical world from other Western genres is the importance of score reading. You rarely see pop producers working from a score in the same way as a classical producer would. This is likely because they come from different musical backgrounds that do not prioritise score reading and have developed different skill sets. However, the importance of score reading in classical music production can present a significant barrier to those who are uncomfortable with reading music. (Buttner-Schnirer 2024).

David McCaw (producer) emphasised the significance of production values and highlighted how record labels safeguard these values in classical productions:

> The results, though, are probably going to depend on the level of expectations. If record companies maintain the kind of standards that they once held dear, then maybe the results will be as good as it is. It really depends on the awareness of the people who are producing the recordings. Do they have the production values? So, the fact that you can do it at home, do it yourself, and easily edit and enhance the audio all comes down to this: do you know what you are aiming for, and are you informed enough? (McCaw 2024)

Anne-Marie Sylvestre (producer/engineer) noted how classical music has become increasingly accessible to a wider audience in recent decades "[Regarding increased number of pre-concert speeches by conductors] The link between the public and the musicians is evolving. So, it is less elitist than it used to be" (Sylvestre 2024).

David Houston (producer) remarked on the growing public discourse surrounding classical music production practices:

> The more that people can get into recording classical music, then I think it is great if they get access to people who help steer them in the right direction. That is why I have been really enjoying the 'Classical Music Location Recording' Facebook group since you get some wildly different opinions on how to do things. But at least people can go there and talk about it. (Houston 2024).

Snapper (producer/recording engineer) also noted the growing opportunities for employment in production work, which no longer rely solely on rare internships at specialised institutions:

> But there is a sense, though, that the field has opened up. Still, the idea that being an audio engineer is something that is not inaccessible or requires an internship in a major studio or with a Decca engineer. (Snapper 2024).

Houston (producer) also underscored the rise in high-quality publications focused on classical productions:

> It is great that people are interested in learning as much as they can. I think it is also great that people like Richard King and the Decca group put out books through the Audio Engineering Society Presents series where they explain what they do and why. Before, it used to be that you and I would have to go to do a degree somewhere and pay lots of money to get that kind of insight. (Houston 2024).

Buttner-Schnirer (producer/recording engineer) highlighted potential reasons why democratisation has not been fully realised in classical music production:

> On one side, the nature of traditional classical production has made it necessary for there to be very specialised people who really know their craft. This is a valuable and wonderful thing. On the other side, things like score reading, access to exceptional acoustic environments, and knowledge of traditional music production aesthetics continue to present barriers that prevent classical from becoming as democratised as other Western genres. (Buttner-Schnirer 2024).

Michael Houstoun (pianist) stated a potential downside of democratisation in classical productions:

> I might talk about the amateurisation of music because that has happened too. Anybody can record themselves and put themselves out into the public domain just like that. There was a time when I was coming through and developing my career, and you were invited to record because you had established a history of quality. Therefore, it was commercially viable that you might record, but it was also an acknowledgement that you had achieved a certain level, etc. All of that is gone. You can be crap and get yourself on YouTube. It is just the general levels of discernment that have fractured all over the place. (Houstoun 2024).

He also stated that, due to a lack of quality assurance mechanisms, the overall quality of classical production releases has decreased:

> Anything goes [as a recording right now]. How do people even know what is good? I think we are in danger of just being swamped with mediocrity. Just overwhelmed by it because it is so everywhere and so available that levels of discernment will, in fact, be affected by this. People will lose a sense of what is really worth listening to. Who are the sincere, profound artists? Who is just fiddling around and having a good time? I do not know. I think there is a danger

> there. Recordings used to be really kind of a seal of approval on an artist. It was a big deal, especially when you made your first recordings. Then the recordings would get out there, and it was like, 'This artist is worth recording.' So, it was definitely an affirmation that I do not think that is much there now. (Houstoun 2024).

Not all professionals view democratisation negatively. By contrast, Tim Dodd (producer) welcomed the varying degrees of technical capabilities in contemporary recordings: "You can have both levels, and both levels are appreciated for what they are" (Dodd 2024). However, King (recording engineer) identifies potential challenges associated with this shift:

> On the surface, I think [democratisation] is an excellent idea. The only question is, will it upset the balance of expertise, and will an artist get the best product possible if everyone is equally involved in the manipulation of this [production process]? (King 2024)

Discussion

The study illustrates a key finding from the interviews: classical music production remains deeply rooted in hierarchical and traditional practices, with a clear preference for established workflows and the prioritisation of expertise. The article discusses how traditional workflows, such as the roles of conductors, producers, and performers, still dominate classical music production and the tension between maintaining these structures and embracing the autonomy that democratisation offers. Therefore, the classical music production process is characterised by a measured resistance to democratisation, which is perceived to threaten the stability of artistic integrity and efficiency.

The practicalities of large-scale orchestral production seem to naturally resist democratisation. The complexity of coordinating multiple musicians and ensuring the cohesiveness of the performance necessitates clear roles and defined authority, which poses challenges to adopting a more flexible, egalitarian approach. Nonetheless, the interviews reveal that, while the traditional model may remain dominant, the boundaries of these roles are not entirely rigid, and some practitioners welcome the changes that democratisation could bring.

On one hand, advances in technology and the increasing availability of resources have expanded opportunities for musicians and producers to engage with classical music in new ways. This growing accessibility could enable the democratisation of classical music production in ways that were previously unimaginable, particularly by breaking down the barriers to information and education. While democratisation has the potential to lower entry barriers and offer greater opportunities for self-release, some participants were concerned that it might flood the market with low-quality productions that may undermine the standards historically defining classical music, removing the traditional curatorial functions of record labels and potentially leading to a loss of quality control and a fracturing of the classical music canon. Moreover, the level of expertise required to

execute high-quality classical recordings remains a challenge for democratisation efforts, particularly when compared to the more flexible and accessible nature of popular music production.

As O'Grady (2021: 211) highlights in a discussion of recording technology and the democratisation of access to tools and knowledge, certain "de-democratising" factors persist, particularly in the context of large studios adapting to digital technologies. This paradox exemplifies the broader effects of democratisation in classical music production. While it has empowered artists to take greater control of their creative processes and facilitated self-production, this newfound autonomy comes with challenges. Artists, free from traditional gatekeepers, can explore their creativity more openly but may also face self-doubt and pressure to meet perceived quality standards, particularly if they lack confidence in sound recording techniques. Thus, while democratisation offers freedom, it also brings uncertainty, as artists may question their ability to achieve their ambitions without the requisite technical skills or validation from established collaborators and industry institutions.

As Taylor (2001: 6) pointed out, the assertion that a particular technology is democratising should always be accompanied by critical questions: "In what ways? For whom?" The important questions that this research is trying to answer are: Who would benefit from the democratisation of classical music production, and who might be adversely affected? Although there is no clear answer to this question, the interview data suggests that younger practitioners are generally more receptive to democratisation in CMP.

This generational shift highlights a curious case of inverted trajectories between the two fields regarding education. As Green (2002) observes, popular music learning has historically been characterised by informal, peer-directed practices—"learning in the garage"—which have only recently become institutionalised through the proliferation of music technology degrees. Conversely, classical music has long been defined by formal institutionalisation within conservatories. Today, however, CMP is attempting to reverse-engineer the informal learning networks that PMP mastered decades ago, moving from the conservatory to the YouTube tutorial. This transition had challenges because the tacit knowledge of classical production—such as critical listening in specific acoustic spaces or providing musical feedback to performers during recording—was designed to be transmitted through master-apprentice lineages, not decentralised digital platforms. Consequently, the struggle to democratise CMP is not merely technological but pedagogical, as the genre attempts to adapt its rigid educational heritage to an open, informal digital ecosystem.

The recent history of technological advancements in popular music could serve as a restricted model for how classical music production might become more democratised in the future. However, there are a number of factors that cannot be easily democratised in CMP. These factors are: 1) traditional educational and institutional foundations, 2) access to physical performance spaces, 3) production expertise and resources, and 4) reliance on high-quality digital signal processing tools, as extensive creative post-production techniques are less applicable in this field. A larger summary of contrasting CMP and PMP can be found in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Comparative Analysis of Democratisation in Popular and Classical Music Production

THEMES	Popular Music Production	Classical Music Production
Structure and continuity	Hybridisation of roles, collaborative, allows solo creative processes, innovation, driven by technological progress	Hierarchical, specialised roles, performer agency remains unchanged, conservatism, slower adaptation to technology due to traditions
Physical location and mediation	Anywhere, remote sessions, integrates studio production as an essential part of the creative process, often using the studio itself as a compositional tool	Tied to physical performance spaces and special venues, strong emphasis on live performance, with the studio used primarily for capturing live-like performances
Accessibility	Tools and distribution platforms are more accessible to semi-professionals and amateurs	Remains less accessible due to the high cost of specialised venues, instruments, and institutional gatekeeping

The democratisation of audio production has lowered both the financial and training barriers for producing recordings that meet professional technical standards. However, it has shifted much of the creative control to product designers through the reliance on presets and automated settings, effectively transforming music producers into consumers of production technology (Zagorski-Thomas 2014). Although these technologies imply a democratisation of production, home recording remains a mode of production that is inherently tied to and reliant on consumption (de Carvalho 2012). In the context of CMP, the limitations of home recordings, as outlined above, suggest that the democratisation of CMP may be restricted to some processes of the production process (for example, composition) and possibly not affect other at all (for example, large-scale orchestral recording). However, many young musicians and entrepreneurs may require substantial persuasion to believe that true democratisation can ever be effectively achieved through multinational corporations or their subsidiaries (Hesmondhalgh 1997). The scepticism remains regarding whether true democratisation can be achieved through commercial infrastructures. As (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2019) argue, even "producer-oriented" platforms face significant limitations in their ability to effectively democratise cultural production or overturn existing hierarchies. For these reasons, more idealistic views of the democratisation of music production, distribution, and consumption are subject to scrutiny (Watson 2014).

Recommendations

Interview data suggests that CMP education and practice focus on performance skills and adherence to traditional methods, leaving many classical musicians less

familiar with contemporary recording techniques and newer, democratising technologies embraced in PMP. A few participants suggested integrating recording technology into classical performance curricula to help performers stay competitive in the future job prospects. John Will Parks IV (percussionist) discussed the advantages of incorporating recording techniques into performance teaching:

> I am very fortunate to have visited a lot of conservatories for guest lectures. Even at the highest level, students are not recording lessons. At the end of the day, the people who find a way to advance as quickly as possible, to be able to hear things, and be able to qualify and quantify their progress are going to beat the people who do not. (Parks IV 2024).

This familiarity with recording technology allows performers to have more opportunities later in their careers in the music industry. For instance, for Kemp English (pianist), such exploration of recording technologies allowed him to self-produce over 10 albums, and he mentioned how studio production broadened his creative journey:

> Once I gradually realised what you could do with it [studio production], then you [as a performer] can start manipulating performances into something that you want, even though maybe it was not what you managed to achieve from the first run-through. So, the more experience you get with the technology, the more it allows you scope to create something that maybe was not there to start with. And that is an advantage (…). I think once you know what you can achieve in the studio, then you may go into the studio with a different objective. (English 2024).

While it is unlikely that large-scale orchestral recordings will be replicated in home studios, small-scale, technologically driven productions (for example, layering recordings with virtual instruments) might pave the way for more democratised forms of classical music creation, particularly in niche areas such as solo performances or chamber music. Ritchie (composer) also emphasised the importance of incorporating technology into music-making:

> A lot of composers are creating their own works entirely electronically in their bedrooms. With the quality of the sounds these days, you can get fine sounds. For me personally, I would not find that as satisfying. Because I think music is a collaboration and music I write anyway is for people. But having said that, I do acknowledge that the way forward is going to involve more technology. (Ritchie 2024).

As a final remark, Toru Kamekawa (recording engineer) suggests that although some advancements can be unsettling as they may threaten traditional roles, embracing technological progress is inevitable:

> Of course, this [democratisation] can be very frightening for us. For instance, I might lose my ingenious job. However, these kinds of changes occur across many fields. It is not just in popular music or music in general but also in areas like drawing, writing, and even document preparation. For example, I have used translation software online, which could lead to professional translators

> losing their jobs. Situations like these are becoming increasingly common. That said, we cannot resist these technological trends. (Kamekawa 2024).

Conclusion

The research highlights significant differences in how democratisation has unfolded in classical music production (CMP) and popular music production (PMP), with PMP being far more adaptable to new technologies and processes. CMP, by contrast, remains more resistant due to its deep-rooted traditions, hierarchical structures, and reliance on live performance practices. While technological advancements have been widely adopted in PMP, their integration into CMP has been slower, limiting accessibility and flexibility. However, the potential for democratisation in CMP is evident, particularly through education reform, the adoption of affordable tools, and the decentralisation of production processes. By embracing the advantages of democratisation seen in PMP—such as access to production tools and the incorporation of new technologies in education—CMP can empower classical musicians to take greater control of their production processes and engage in more creative collaborations. This suggests the possibility of a hybrid approach that honours classical music's faithfulness to tradition while incorporating innovative practices from popular music.

This paper is part of a broader research which seeks to distil the expertise of highly accomplished practitioners into accessible insights that can facilitate the accelerated development of novices into experts. Efforts to lower the barriers to entry for classical music production (CMP) are particularly valuable for future advancements in the field. Subsequent research might explore the specific challenges classical music institutions face in adopting new technologies and more democratic production practices. Moreover, further studies could investigate how tradition and innovation can be successfully balanced in CMP, drawing on case studies of individuals or projects that exemplify a more flexible and progressive approach.

Endnotes

(1) Participants are initially referenced by their full names upon first mention. In subsequent instances, they are identified by surname only, accompanied by a reiteration of their professional role to ensure clarity of perspective. This convention maintains consistency in attribution while foregrounding the relationship between participants' contributions and their positions within the study.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr Michael Holland and Dr Ayşe Ilgın Sözen Ekici for reviewing the manuscript. The author is deeply grateful to the numerous participants who generously contributed their time and insights to the research.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (Reference: D23/361). All the participants signed ethics consent forms and agreed to be named in the study. This research has been conducted as part of Emre Ekici's Doctor of Philosophy in Music degree at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. An extended version of the research can be accessed in the form of the forthcoming thesis, which will be available via the University of Otago library repository.

Funding

This work was supported by Professor John Steele Doctoral Scholarship in Musicology, awarded by University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, in 2024.

ORCID

Emre Ekici https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7362-3784

References

Bibliography

Alleyne, M. 2020. Authenticity in Music Production. In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Music Production*. London: Bloomsbury: 19-31.

Anthony, B. 2017. Mixing as a Performance: Creative Approaches to the Popular Music Mix Process. *Journal on the Art of Record Production* 11. https://www.arpjournal.com/asarpwp/mixing-as-a-performance-creative-approaches-to-the-popular-music-mix-process/. Accessed: 3 November 2024.

Auslander, P. 2008. *Liveness*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203938133

Bennett, T. et al. 2008. Tensions of the Musical Field. In *Culture, Class, Distinction*. London: Routledge: 75-93.

Born, G. and Devine, K. 2015. Music Technology, Gender, and Class: Digitization, Educational and Social Change in Britain. *Twentieth-Century Music* 12 (2): 135-172. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572215000018

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

Brackett, D. 2016. *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*. Oakland, CA.: University of California Press.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2006. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Burgess, R. J. 2013. *The Art of Music Production: The Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

de Carvalho, A. T. 2012. The Discourse of Home Recording: Authority of 'Pros' and the Sovereignty of the Big Studios. *Journal on the Art of Record Production* 7. https://www.arpjournal.com/asarpwp/the-discourse-of-home-recording-

authority-of-%E2%80%9Cpros%E2%80%9D-and-the-sovereignty-of-the-big-studios/. Accessed: 9 January 2025.
Green, L. 2002. *How Popular Musicians Learn: a Way Ahead for Music Education*. Burlington, VT.: Ashgate.
Hesmondhalgh, D. –
1997. Post-Punk's Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry: the Success and Failure of Rough Trade. *Popular Music* 16 (3): 255-274. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143000008400
1999. Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre. *Cultural Studies* 13 (1): 34-61. https://doi.org/10.1080/095023899335365
Hesmondhalgh, D., Jones, E. and Rauh, A. 2019. SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms. *Social Media + Society* 5 (4): 2056305119883429. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883429
Leech-Wilkinson, D. 2020. *Challenging Performance: Classical Music Performance Norms and How to Escape Them*. Available at: https://challengingperformance.com/the-book-50/. Accessed: 9 January 2025.
Lena, J. C. 2012. *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.
Leyshon, A. 2009. The Software Slump?: Digital Music, the Democratisation of Technology, and the Decline of the Recording Studio Sector within the Musical Economy. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 41 (6): 1309-1331. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1068/a40352
McNally, K. and Seay, T. 2020. Studying Recording Techniques. In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Music Production*. London: Bloomsbury Academic: 233-247.
Negus, K. Ed. 1999. *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. New York: Routledge.
O'Grady, P. 2021. Sound City and Music from the Outskirts: the De-democratisation of Pop Music Production. *Creative Industries Journal* 14 (3): 211-225. https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2020.1839281
Rogers, H., Freitas, J. and Porfírio, J.F. Eds. 2023. *YouTube and Music: Online Culture and Everyday Life*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501387302
Taylor, T.D. 2001. *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology & Culture*. New York, NY.: Routledge.
Théberge, P. 1997. *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*. Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press.
Watson, A. 2014. *Cultural Production in and Beyond the Recording Studio*. New York: Routledge.
Wolfe, P. 2023. Self Production: Creativity and Process, Triggers and Surprise. *IASPM Journal* 13 (1): 26-44. https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2023)v13i1.3en
Zagorski-Thomas, S. –
2007. Gesturing Producers and Scratching Musicians. In *3rd Art of Record Production Conference*. Brisbane, Australia. https://www.artofrecordproduction.com/aorpjoom/arp-conferences/arp-

archive-conference-papers/19-arp-2007/127-zagorski-thomas-2007. Accessed: 9 January 9 2025.

2014. *The Musicology of Record Production*. Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Interviews

Anne-Marie Sylvestre. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 20 February.
Anthony Ritchie. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 19 January.
David Houston. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Wellington, New Zealand, 25 January.
David McCaw. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Wellington, New Zealand, 25 January.
Hamish McKeich. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 4 March.
John Neill. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Wellington, New Zealand, 26 January.
John Will Parks IV. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 13 February.
Kemp English. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Wellington, New Zealand, 23 January.
Kenneth Young. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 1 February.
Martha de Francisco. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 2 July.
Michael Fine. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 8 February.
Michael Houstoun. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 6 February.
Nick Squire. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 10 March.
Padraig Buttner-Schnirer. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 4 April.
Pieter Snapper. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 7 March.
Richard King. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 17 July.
Seray Kalelioğlu. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 26 February.
Tim Dodd. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 26 March.
Toru Kamekawa. 2024. Interviewed by Author, Online, 6 September.
Will Howie. 2023. Interviewed by Author, Online, 27 December.