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Organic Metal: Two Worlds Collide

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Abstract

This article analyses the media and public discourse surrounding the sold-out symphonic metal concert, *Organic Metal: Two Worlds Collide*, performed by Plague of Angels at York Minster in April 2025. Using Critical Discourse Analysis of thirty-two news and broadcast items alongside netnography of Reddit discussions, it asks what the controversy tells us about how popular music's meanings are negotiated across religious authority, heritage discourse, and fan reception. The findings pivot on three axes: heritage versus sacrilege, inclusion versus elitism, and the tension between community mission and commercialism. A single metonym, the "blasphemy-by-association" t-shirt, proved highly spreadable and repeatedly recoded the event as a moral breach. Sequencing effects were decisive: when stories led with risk to heritage and mission, coverage read as stewardship; when they led with finance, it read as commercialisation. Participatory publics often softened sacrilege by reframing the event through pragmatic preservation. The study contributes to popular music studies by showing how genre legitimacy is negotiated when metal enters institutional heritage settings, and it offers practical guidance on programming and communication for sacred heritage sites hosting popular music.

KEYWORDS: sacred heritage, symphonic metal, Critical Discourse Analysis, cultural capital, moral economy, metal music studies

Introduction

On 25 April 2025, York Minster hosted a sold-out symphonic metal concert titled *Organic Metal: Two Worlds Collide*. Following classical organ music alongside adapted rock classics by Black Sabbath and Deep Purple, the English metal band Plague of Angels performed original music, with titles like "Beyond Salvation",

beneath the Lenten cross alongside the organ. This was the first-ever heavy metal concert in the 800-year-old Gothic cathedral, a Grade I listed building and place of religious consecration for over 1,400 years (BBC Look North 2025). The event was designed, in the words of lead initiator and metal scholar Mark Mynett, as a "sonic and visual spectacle" (Connell 2025d) that combined the "raw power of metal and the grandeur of orchestral music" (Mynett 2025) with the powerful sound of the 190-year-old organ. National and local media reported on the concert and controversy that arose during the event's promotion and apparent popularity (Barton 2025). Parishioners branded the concert an "outright insult" (Halliday and Vinter 2025) to their faith and "unsuitable for a religious setting" (Lilley 2025a). The controversy centred on the band's perceived associations and appropriateness of metal music in a sacred space. The event thus contested the cathedral's legitimate use (see Smith 2006: 44). The concert's subtitle, *Two Worlds Collide*, shifted from the intention of an artistic experiment, that is, contemporary metal music supported by the power of a pipe organ, to signifying an overt public confrontation between secular and sacred claims. Allegiances shifted unexpectedly as parishioners and York Minster's senior management took opposing positions on the church's modern role, with the musicians caught in the middle.

In this article, I conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1992; Reisigl and Wodak 2015) of the media coverage and public online discussion the concert generated, asking: what does the York Minster symphonic metal debate tell us about how popular music's meanings are negotiated across religious authority, heritage discourse, and fan reception? My analysis treats the cathedral and its public commentators as participants in a cultural field, a structured space of social negotiation where competitors vie for legitimacy and authority (Bourdieu 1993). I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and doxa (1977, 1986, 1993), as well as his distinction between field autonomy and heteronomy, to understand the anxiety surrounding market logics. This core sociological framework is combined with Grace Davie's (1994) work on "believing without belonging" to situate the event in its religious context; Laurajane Smith's (2006) critique of Authorised Heritage Discourse to analyse the clash over heritage; and Henry Jenkins and colleagues' (2013) account of spreadable media to connect media production with public reception.

Challenging the doxic, taken-for-granted assumptions about the cathedral's purpose (Bourdieu 1977: 164-171), the concert quickly became a media event that audiences modified as they shared it (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 2). Early coverage used the dynamics of culture wars to position arguments as opposing binaries, such as heritage and sacrilege (Mynett 2025) or mission and money (Halliday and Vinter 2025). Such framing exemplifies how symbolic elites with preferential access to media production control public discourse by shaping how the event is defined (van Dijk 2008: viii, 31-33), a power partly derived from their institutionalised cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986: 247-248). The initial backlash policed what opponents saw as a breach of the Minster's moral economy (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 52-53), where its sacred worth, or symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986: 243-245), was threatened by the commercial value of ticket sales (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Opponents defended Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006) by referencing a notorious t-shirt; simultaneously, quotation

patterns showed access asymmetries, a distribution familiar in studies of news discourse (van Dijk 2008). I track how legitimacy is claimed and contested via framing strategies, and how these claims circulate and are reworked in participatory spaces (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). My aim is to examine what the debate tells us about music, heritage, culture, and religion in contemporary society. Before turning to methods and findings, I situate the case in the field of metal music studies to establish the genre-specific dynamics that make this controversy analytically distinct.

Metal in the Cultural Field: Stigma, Controversy, and Boundary-Making

The York Minster case sits at the intersection of two bodies of scholarship: studies of heritage discourse and the growing field of metal music studies. Metal has long occupied a distinctive structural position in cultural hierarchies. Bethany Bryson's (1996) study of musical taste showed that cultural tolerance broadens with education, yet heavy metal was the genre most consistently excluded across all social strata; tolerant tastemakers who embrace diverse musical forms draw the line at metal, and that act of exclusion itself signals cultural sophistication. Although categorical tolerance has risen considerably since then, metal remains the single most disliked genre in recent U.S. survey data (Lizardo 2025). Andy R. Brown (2003) observed a similar pattern in the academy, characterising metal as a "paradigmatic case of neglect" within subcultural theory. When a heritage institution of York Minster's stature extends its consecrating authority to the one genre whose cultural legitimacy is most routinely denied, the logic of exclusion is disrupted at its most symbolically charged point.

Metal studies scholars have applied Bourdieu's field theory to analyse how the genre's internal dynamics reproduce and contest these hierarchies. Keith Kahn-Harris (2007) demonstrated that extreme metal scenes generate their own forms of subcultural capital, split between "mundane" capital (scene knowledge, collecting, attendance) and "transgressive" capital (the capacity to push sonic, lyrical, and visual boundaries); Diana Miller (2016) extended the same apparatus to a different national scene with consistent results. Spracklen, Lucas, and Deeks (2014) connected metal to heritage by showing how musicians in northern England construct identity through narratives of industrial history, landscape, and cultural memory. The present article extends that trajectory by examining what happens when metal's field logic collides with the field of sacred heritage, a situation where subcultural capital and institutional cultural capital meet on the latter's territory.

Controversies at this boundary are themselves a documented object of study. Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine (2011) argued that metal controversy is not inherent to the music but socially produced through the interaction of metal practices with specific religious, as well as political and social, contexts. Gérôme Guibert and Jedediah Sklower (2011) analysed Catholic opposition to the Hellfest festival in Clisson (near Nantes) in France, where bishops and local politicians framed the event as satanic and dangerous to local identity; the controversy depended on context since the same music in Paris would not have provoked the

same response. Marcus Moberg (2011) described the "double controversy" of Christian metal, where the hybrid form is too metal for Christians and too Christian for metalheads, a concept that maps onto the York Minster situation, where the cathedral's act of hosting metal crosses boundaries in both directions. Relatedly, Miroslav Vrzal (2022) catalogued the discursive strategies that Christian opponents deploy against metal events in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where campaigns targeted metal in secular public spaces such as festivals and concert halls. York Minster inverts that dynamic: here, metal enters a sacred institutional space, and religious actors defend their own territory rather than attempting to exclude metal from the public sphere.

Direct applications of Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model to metal music reception remain limited (see Varas-Díaz and Nevárez Araújo 2025 for a broader disciplinary overview), but Vrzal's (2022) analysis offers a partial parallel: Christian actors "encode" metal as a spiritual and moral threat, while metal scenes "decode" that opposition as subcultural capital that reinforces the genre's transgressive identity (see also Kahn-Harris 2007: 121-139). The present study operationalises Hall's three decoding positions (dominant, negotiated, oppositional) in a hybrid media environment where journalistic encoding meets participatory recoding on Reddit, a context that extends the model from broadcast-era reception into the spreadable media ecology described by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013).

Believing Without Belonging and the Endangered Organ

The York Minster controversy reflects general shifts in the place of Christian worship in Britain. While clergy in the 1960s merely emphasised the relevance of the church, since the 1970s, the sacred has re-emerged in unconventional forms (Davie 1994: 33-38). Davie (1994) argued that while routine participation in organised religion has declined (*belonging*), public identification with belief is relatively durable (*believing*). Anglican worship has contracted over several decades, and average weekly attendance post-COVID remains substantially below pre-2020 baselines (Halliday 2025).

The social consequences of this shift are varied. For a minority, churches remain centres of worship and local identity, whereas for many others, they are heritage sites and civic landmarks. Institutions respond to this "penumbra" of latent affiliation (Davie 1994: 56) by broadening their mission. They stress a welcome for everyone, regardless of belief (Barton 2025), and design outreach to lower barriers to entry. As the Dean of York Minster, the Very Rev Dominic Barrington, explained, this outreach is an "important part of mission" because many people find "vast great buildings such as York Minster very imposing" (BBC Radio York 2025). He offered an example of "somebody whose dad has lived in Pocklington all his life and has apparently never set foot in the minster because he doesn't think he can". The cathedral's leadership, therefore, framed the concert as a practical way to break down these perceived barriers and deemed it "not (…) incompatible with Christian mission" (BBC Radio York 2025). In Davie's (1994: 56) terms, the religious leaders seek to convert residual belief into civic belonging, and the York Minster case

foregrounds that strategy. Mission statements in the corpus emphasise welcome and invitation rather than doctrinal demands (BBC Radio York 2025), and they situate cultural programming within that larger effort (Connell 2025a).

The pipe organ embodies the tension between heritage as a material object versus a living cultural practice. The event organisers implicitly challenged the Authorised Heritage Discourse's focus on the material (Smith 2006: 29) by invoking a history of contested use, from the Victorian organ's rise to the German *Orgelbewegung* (Haskell 1988; Thistlethwaite 1990). This negotiation extends to rock; early heavy metal bands like Iron Butterfly and Deep Purple used the organ's capacity for sustained sounds to create an "aural wall of heavy sound" (Walser 1993: 9). Positioning itself in this lineage, the *Organic Metal* project aimed to demonstrate that high-status heritage can host contemporary culture without surrendering its integrity through active recontextualisation (Smith 2006). The artistic rationale aligned with Smith's (2006) emphasis on heritage as present-day experience (45) and performance (66), rather than solely as a static object. The justification rested on a shared sonic capacity: both the pipe organ and amplified metal produce low-frequency resultant tones that "display and enact overwhelming power" (Walser 1993: 43) and are grounded in the aesthetic of heaviness that defines the genre (Herbst and Mynett 2025a, 2025b). The project's hypothesis held that this embodied encounter could generate new affective attachments and convert curiosity into care, which foregrounds intangible processes over the material object itself.

While framed in experiential terms, this appeal to living heritage through embodied encounter responds to a sociological problem rooted in the object's value. This crisis is one of capital conversion (Bourdieu 1986: 252-255). The organ as a physical entity is objectified cultural capital embedded in architecture, but its value and continued existence depend on embodied cultural capital: the repertoires of skilled players and the engaged attention of audiences. As David Pipe, the organist in the *Organic Metal* event, puts it, instruments "have to be used to be kept in working order" (ARD 2024, translation). As church attendance contracts, the embodied capital required to sustain the objectified capital diminishes. The instrument then loses material care while the cultural knowledge surrounding it atrophies. Significant financial pressures intensify this cycle. York Minster, for instance, has reported running costs of nearly £4 million per year (Lilley 2025a), and the recent restoration of its Grand Organ consumed £2 million (Barton 2025). These pressures explain why commercial readings surface so readily, even when institutional actors frame events as stewardship.

Method

I use two methods to study the public discourse surrounding the *Organic Metal* event: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1992; Reisigl and Wodak 2015; Reisigl 2018) for the mainstream media corpus and Netnography (Kozinets 2020) for the renegotiation of these media frames in public online discussions. This combination links top-down media production with its bottom-up reception to

capture the controversy as it unfolded across institutional and participatory forums (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013).

CDA treats discourse as a three-dimensional social practice involving text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 1992). To operationalise this framework, my textual analysis draws on the discourse-historical approach (Reisigl 2018) by focusing on discursive strategies that include: *nomination* (how actors are named); *predication* (the qualities attributed to them); *argumentation* (the recurring topoi, or lines of argument); and *perspectivisation* (whose voices are foregrounded and how). I also draw on Teun van Dijk's (2008: 105) concept of the ideological square to track patterns of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

The media corpus comprises thirty-two items published or broadcast between February 2024 and July 2025 (see list of data placed after the references). It includes coverage of the project's debut concert, which laid out the project's aims and problem statement around the endangered organ. The dataset encompasses twenty-one newspaper and magazine articles spanning national broadsheets, local press, religious outlets, and specialist music magazines. It also includes eleven transcripts from television and radio broadcasts. These media ecologies present inherent biases; national desks tend to maximise controversy, while specialist outlets often focus more on aesthetic success. Some figures cited in the corpus, like running costs, circulate from single advocacy sources, which is why I treated them as discourse claims rather than verified facts.

The CDA began with an open coding pass across the corpus to identify recurrent themes, which produced three dominant frames that structure the findings: heritage versus sacrilege; inclusion versus elitism; community versus commercialism. Subsequently, a focused micro analysis within each frame examined lexical bundles and topoi frequency alongside perspectivisation patterns that include the repetition of risk statistics and the circulation of the t-shirt intertext as a blasphemy by association device. Coding notes were maintained in a schema that linked excerpt to code and theoretical frame.

Netnography (Kozinets 2020) allowed me to consider interactions between online publics to capture less visible actors in the public discourse. The corpus consists of two Reddit threads (see dataset), which reflect engaged participants rather than a representative public but show how media frames are resisted and remade (Kozinets 2020). I coded comments according to Hall's (1980) three primary decoding positions: dominant readings that accepted the media's primary frame; negotiated readings that adapted the frame to local contexts or personal beliefs; oppositional readings that rejected the frame's underlying premises.

Concerning ethics, data from Reddit was drawn from publicly accessible threads without my intervention. I anonymised user identities and paraphrased quotations where possible. In terms of media, the data is in the public domain, and names are only included for people in official roles. All quotations are used under fair dealing for criticism and review. A note on positionality: Mark Mynett, the leader of the *Organic Metal* project and Plague of Angels, and I are academic colleagues. This pre-existing relationship facilitated access to the project's background and context. However, to ensure analytical rigour and mitigate potential bias, I applied a strict CDA framework to the public textual data. Throughout the research process, I

treated Mynett's role as that of an informant who provided contextual knowledge; this approach maintained this study's critical independence. No private conversations were analysed.

Findings

Across all three discursive frames, a set of rhetorical strategies structured the debate, as identified by the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2015; Reisigl 2018). *Nomination* constructed competing identities by casting actors as "the faithful" and "worshippers" on one side against "visitors" and pragmatic "stewards" on the other. *Predication* assigned qualities along these partisan lines; opponents framed the event as an offence to the faith, while supporters were described as "welcoming" and "responsible". A recurring set of argument types (topoi) provided the core logic. Arguments pivoted on numbers (organ loss, daily costs), authority (the Dean), threat (sacrilege), purity (sacred/secular boundaries), consequence (losing relevance), and social good (inclusion). *Perspectivisation* consistently showed an asymmetry of access and power, as symbolic elites control influential discourse genres (van Dijk 2008: 31-33). More specifically, named institutional voices were quoted at length, while opponents often appeared as an anonymised chorus. Finally, *mitigation* and *intensification* tracked the moral stakes through hedges like "not about money" and intensifiers such as "addicted to money" and "deeply inappropriate". Such patterning formed the linguistic foundation for the three primary axes of contestation (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Competing discourses on York Minster's legitimate use.

Analytical Axis	**Orthodox Frame (Opponents)**	**Heterodox Frame (Proponents)**
Heritage	Sacred, static protected space (authorised heritage discourse)	Living, active, evolving venue ("use it or lose it", living heritage)
Inclusion	Defence of sacred boundaries, policing	Radical welcome, breaking barriers ("civil religion")
Economy	Commercialism ("addicted to money", breach of moral economy)	Stewardship (sustainable mission, "gift")

Heritage vs. Sacrilege

The media coverage and social media discourse suggested that two incompatible definitions of York Minster were at play. These became visible through the concert announcement, which disrupted the doxa (Bourdieu 1977: 164-171) of what parishioners implicitly understood as the cathedral's purpose and resulted in a public confrontation between two discourses (ibid). Supporters framed the event through a heterodox lens of creative heritage preservation, viewing the cathedral as a living entity that survives through use (Smith 2006: 29-34). Opponents, meanwhile, articulated an orthodox defence of the sacred and positioned the

Minster as a static sacred space whose integrity was threatened by amplified popular music and the moral associations attached to some performers.

The supportive frame was built on a narrative of material risk and responsible stewardship. Broadcasters sketched a national pattern in plain terms using a recurring argumentative topos of impending crisis (Reisigl 2018: 52): "Across the nation, organs are falling silent as some churches close their doors for good" (BBC One Show 2024). Organist David Pipe emphasised this urgency: "Organs like this are becoming increasingly endangered (…). We're in a position now where organs are just being either broken down for parts, or they are just being scrapped completely" (BBC One Show 2024). In interviews tied to the York date, Mark Mynett converted this risk into a heritage imperative: "We have four pipe organs a week going to landfill in this country, and we are literally sleepwalking towards losing this valuable cultural heritage". He widened the frame to a dual crisis of buildings and instruments: "We've lost three and a half thousand churches in the last 12 or 13 years and 900 more on the at-risk register" (BBC Radio York 2025). These latter figures on churches were widely repeated by local and national outlets (Lilley 2025a; Halliday 2025; Halliday and Vinter 2025). From this premise of material crisis, advocates argued that saving the endangered organ demands active public engagement and a revitalised musical repertoire to justify its ongoing physical maintenance. Using metaphors of vitality and risk, such as the use-it-or-lose-it trope (ARD 2024), advocates argued that if audiences encounter the organ in compelling contexts, they are more likely to value and support it; if they regard it as a museum piece, they will not. They thus articulated a vision of living heritage as opposed to authorised heritage, where authorised heritage favours static preservation and reverent distance over dynamic reuse and present-day engagement (Smith 2006: 29-34).

Given this framework of crisis, supporters justified the collaboration as stewardship. The Dean, for instance, repeatedly articulated a rationale based on mission and welcome (Barton 2025), a discourse explored more fully below. Such framing invokes the established church's role within a form of civil religion that offers its spaces and marks community life even for nominal members (Davie 1994: 84-88). This discourse of disinterestedness could be interpreted as a euphemisation strategy that frames a project with clear economic dimensions in the legitimate language of the cultural field (Bourdieu 1986: 243). The musicians complemented this missional framing with an artistic one by arguing that the project unlocked the organ's musical potential beyond its liturgical role and created an expressive and embodied experience for new audiences (Carlin 2024; Everley 2025). These statements reject the authorised heritage preference for monumentality by insisting that heritage is produced through present use as an intangible cultural process (Smith 2006: 29-34). Supporters thus attempted to convert symbolic capital into social attention and resources, which would then flow back into conservation and access (Bourdieu 1986, 1993).

The opposition deployed sacred language to defend the cathedral's established role as a space set apart (Reisigl 2018: 52). As one parishioner argued:

> This event is an insult to the sanctity of the cathedral and to the many faithful who regard York Minster as a place of reverence and worship. The idea that

> such a band should be allowed to perform within such a consecrated church is both outrageous and sacrilegious. (Finan 2025)

The language demonstrates moral boundary work (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 52-53) in that it marks amplified popular music as categorically wrong. Another opponent insisted: "There must be a line where deference to secular culture stops and the duty to protect the sacred begins. That line has been crossed" (Halliday and Vinter 2025). Repeatedly, the moral claim brought forward was that the Minster's primary purpose is sacred, not commercial (Finan 2025). The stark opposition arose because the event violated habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 78-87), the ingrained expectations of appropriate conduct in a sacred space. These statements are a boundary defence meant to protect the autonomy of the sacred field from the heteronomous logics of the secular entertainment market (Bourdieu 1993: 38-40).

The most inflammatory move, however, was blasphemy-by-association, a form of negative other-presentation (van Dijk 2008: 5). Rather than debating the York programme, opponents focused on an effective intertext. Across multiple outputs (mostly print), reporters noted that "two of the group's members performed with extreme metal group Cradle of Filth" (Lilley 2025a), a band that "sold what Rolling Stone described as 'the most controversial shirt in rock history'. The T-shirt featured a topless nun masturbating and the words 'Jesus is a cunt'" (Halliday and Vinter 2025; Ludlow 2025). One worshipper called the slogan "possibly the most disgustingly blasphemous anti-Christian sentiment I have ever seen" (Halliday 2025). These journalists strategically employed this anecdote as a metonym that overwrites the actual event. Through deliberate *nomination* and *predication* (Reisigl 2018: 52), they recoded the band Plague of Angels as inherently profane and denied them the symbolic capital, that is, the recognition as a legitimate cultural actor (Bourdieu 1986: 245), needed to perform legitimately in the consecrated field (Bourdieu 1977: 182-183). As a BBC presenter summarised, the concert "prompted controversy because some of the band members have worked with another group which used blasphemous imagery" (BBC Radio 4 2025). Mynett's defence attempted to sever the link by stressing distance and time: "It was a very tenuous link" (Dunphy 2025), noting it was "a t-shirt from 30 years ago, from a completely different band" (Everley 2025), and that two of the Plague of Angels musicians formerly associated with that band "never wore the t-shirt (…), never got any money from its sales" (BBC Radio York 2025). Yet the salience of the anecdote demonstrates its discursive power to frame the debate around moral purity rather than cultural practice. Its power derived from its spreadability, the capacity to travel easily across networks by tapping into existing cultural anxieties and offering easily quotable content for recirculation (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 195-228). Such strategically deployed discourse thus outcompeted more complex narratives in the participatory environment.

The discursive construction of metal as a moral threat through selective association has documented parallels. For example, Guibert and Sklower (2011) showed that Catholic opposition to Hellfest in France followed the same structure and assembled a composite image of metal from its most extreme elements. Vrzal (2022) documented the same strategy in Czech and Slovak campaigns. York Minster extends the pattern into a setting where the religious institution itself is split: the

Dean authorised the event while parishioners mobilised against it, a configuration absent from the continental cases, where religious authorities were uniformly opposed. The blasphemy-by-association trope at York also targeted not the performing band but its members' historical associations with a different group as a more attenuated form of guilt-by-association that tests the limits of the strategy's spreadability.

Many media outputs staged both frames in sequence, but their order and emphasis matter. A familiar pattern opened with the t-shirt controversy, moved through quotations from offended worshippers, and then pivoted to the Dean and organist on mission and stewardship. The analysis suggests a framing effect: the position of the t-shirt anecdote and the presence of an early quotation from the Dean strongly predict an article's overall stance. When heritage risk and institutional endorsement appear early, sacrilege cues typically soften; when blasphemy-by-association leads without an immediate counter-frame, sacrilege readings dominate downstream. These binary labels, however, mask the mixed positions evident in the coverage. Several articles, for instance, praised the performance's musicality while still reporting the t-shirt anecdote (for example, Connell 2025a; Dunphy 2025; Lilley 2025b), a sequencing choice that maximised attention while softening offence. Similarly, some critics accepted the need for outreach but preferred different genres or stricter content policies (for example, Halliday and Vinter 2025). These mixed positions demonstrate a nuance that cautions against reducing all resistance to simple genre prejudice. Visible negotiation, such as admiring the execution yet questioning the setting, or accepting the setting but disliking the repertoire, prefigures the mixed reception mapped in participatory spaces and justifies treating commercialism as a distinct analytical axis.

The central tension of this discursive axis was the risk that the project's recontextualisation of the organ would be read as transgressive, as is common in metal (Kahn-Harris 2007: 121-139), a reading that could harden cultural boundaries and mobilise the guardianship discourses the project sought to circumvent. The survival of heritage may depend on felt experience, a point made clear by the tension between the orthodox defence of a static monument and the heterodox argument for a living instrument. The controversy suggests that the future of such sites may lie not in silent reverence, often associated with the authorised heritage's focus on monumentality and aesthetics, but in purposeful encounters with contemporary culture. This emphasis on active, present-day engagement, even when dissonant, reflects Smith's (2006: 44, 66) contention that heritage values arise from cultural processes and performances rather than from monumentality alone.

Inclusion vs. Elitism

The debate over sacred space was also a contest over who is welcome within it. The second axis, therefore, opposes narratives of radical inclusion to accusations of cultural elitism. Proponents defined the cathedral as a civic space that welcomes all faiths and none while dissolving boundaries between high and low culture. Opponents defended the cathedral as a sacred and liturgical space and argued that certain boundaries around who belongs and what activities are appropriate must

be maintained to preserve its integrity. Supporters reframed resistance as classed taste policing.

Proponents' language was programmatic and hospitable. Echoing the mission articulated in his radio interview (BBC Radio York 2025), the Dean stated the aim "to welcome people from right across society in" (BBC Look North 2025), and Canon Tim Goode reinforced this by stating that the cathedral exists to welcome "those of all faiths and none" (Barton 2025). The events team echoed the message, with the Head of Events stating: "We want to diversify our audience. We want to put on experiences in the cathedral that will bring in new audiences" (Connell 2025c). This diversification imperative responds to the typical church constituency, which is disproportionately older and female (Davie 1994: 117-138), by reaching beyond the existing base. The framing presents the concert as core outreach rather than commercial and can be read as a strategic response to declining attendance (see Davie 1994).

These claims found support in the audience composition. A York Minster spokesperson noted that "most tickets sold out within an hour" (Connell 2025a), and reviewers on the night described the audience as "metal fans in their black t-shirts" alongside "organ concert goers", with a conspicuous spread of ages (Dunphy 2025). These concrete descriptions add evidence that the inclusion strategy successfully reached diverse audiences outside of the typical church constituency. The intended outcome also appears in the participatory data. One sixty-two-year-old first-time attendee, posting on the r/symphonicmetal forum on the day of the concert, embodied the target demographic for this outreach:

> I'm 62 (…) and this concert is being staged in what I believe to be one of the most beautiful places in the world. York Minster. (...) I can't wait, to be honest. I love Rock music, from metal to classic rock but my favourite has to be Symphonic.

Yet reaching diverse audiences alone did not constitute success; the project's underlying hypothesis was that this engagement would convert into ongoing care and support for the heritage itself. Proponents also stressed crossover learning as proof of concept. Plague of Angels drummer Jeff Singer recounted that "people who were into pipe organ music (…) had no idea about metal (…) absolutely loved it", while "metal fans who had never listened to pipe organ music before [were] turning up to the next pipe organ recital" (Everley 2025). This crossover engagement was plausible because of the sonic properties the instruments share. Pipe's line about the instrument "not just [being] a hymn machine" (Carlin 2024) and Mynett's emphasis that "you don't just hear this organ – you feel it" point to the embodied, affective dimension that made the collaboration compelling (Everley 2025).

This institutional strategy responds to "believing without belonging" (Davie 1994) by leveraging affective engagement to convert latent belief into active belonging and heritage care. Aware that a latent religious or spiritual sympathy, the "Anglican penumbra", persists even as active churchgoing declines, the Minster authorities attempted to bridge this gap by offering a non-liturgical reason to enter the sacred space (Davie 1994: 56). These inclusion claims also expand the boundaries of the cultural field (Bourdieu 1993: 41-43). By welcoming a genre often

dismissed as lowbrow, the Minster provided institutional validation and temporarily consecrated the cultural capital of metal. This act represented an attempt by an established institution to "make its mark" (Bourdieu 1993: 60) by incorporating a challenging genre and disrupting the established hierarchy that opponents defended. In doing so, the institution acquired a different form of symbolic capital for itself: that of relevance and civic utility. It thus strategically altered the "rules of the game" for what constitutes legitimate culture within a consecrated space (Bourdieu 1986: 245-248).

In a strategic reversal, the project's advocates framed the opposition's sacral objections as illegitimate class-based taste policing. Mynett argued that hostility to metal rests on a classed hierarchy: "opera and classical are often seen as high culture, whereas metal music is often seen as working class" (Halliday 2025), and judgments based on that split are "entirely wrong" (BBC Radio York 2025). The taste-policing charge gains structural support from Bryson's (1996) finding that heavy metal acts as a boundary marker of symbolic exclusion, the genre rejected even by otherwise omnivorous tastemakers. Although categorical tolerance has risen markedly since the 1990s, metal remains the single most disliked genre in U.S. survey data collected as recently as 2025 (Lizardo 2025: 28). The York Minster case confirms that this stigma happens in institutional settings. York Minster's act of institutional consecration inverts that dynamic: when the site whose cultural authority is beyond question admits the genre whose legitimacy is most routinely denied, the symbolic order that sustains both positions is unsettled. This argument suggests the opponents applied classification schemes generated by their own habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 86), schemes which instinctively rank metal as inappropriate or low. The comparator is strategic: "They wouldn't bat an eyelid at Wagner, but he was a renowned anti-Semite who believed the church was linked to the downfall of European civilisation. But metal is 'wrong' in a cathedral? It's so misguided" (Mynett in Everley 2025). In an op-ed, Mynett (2025) widened the historical lens: composers once deemed unsuitable, such as Berlioz, Verdi, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky, later became integral to church music.

Mynett's move is a reversal in van Dijk's (2008: 128-132) sense, where the accused party reframes themselves as the victim of prejudice by presenting their opponents' actions as the real transgression, in this case, of social norms of fairness and tolerance. This reversal can also be understood as a challenge to the established elite's control over public discourse and their power to define the situation (van Dijk 2008: 13-14). By framing opposition as illegitimate taste policing, proponents sought access to the "public mind" (van Dijk 2008: 14) to legitimise their alternative definition of the Minster's cultural role. Here, critics become guardians of arbitrary status distinctions rather than principled defenders of sanctity. The counter-critique challenges the consecration of specific cultural forms by emphasising the historical contingency and the social labour needed to maintain high and low boundaries (Bourdieu 1977: 195). This expert framing was paralleled in public discourse on Reddit as users independently deployed similar arguments to expose perceived double standards. One user on the r/unitedkingdom subreddit, for instance, contrasted the reaction to metal with the likely reception of a canonical work with similar themes:

> I wonder if the parishioners would be outraged if the RSC [Royal Shakespeare Company] wanted to do a performance or [sic] Macbeth there (a play that thematically is not that different to a black metal e.g the occult, mysticism, ambition etc) probably not in fact they would probably be the first in line for tickets.

This comment demonstrates a sophisticated decoding of the situation (Hall 1980) that rejects the surface argument about sacrilege and reinterprets the conflict through a lens of cultural hierarchy. Like Mynett's (2025) Wagner comparison, it de-legitimises the opposition by suggesting their moral objections are inconsistently applied and are instead a proxy for protecting the status of consecrated high culture against a perceived lowbrow intruder (Block 2017: 348-350).

In the r/unitedkingdom thread, the blasphemy-by-association frame proved highly spreadable (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013), with the Cradle of Filth t-shirt being the immediate entry point for many Redditors. Users decoded this frame in multiple ways (Hall 1980). Many produced critically negotiated readings that demonstrated how audiences actively retrofit media content by inserting it into their own contexts and shaping its meaning (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013: 1-46). One Redditor, for instance, accepted the premise of a "sin" but used the Christian doctrine of forgiveness to critique the objectors: "Holding someone's past sins against them isn't very Christian is it". Another attempted to downplay the t-shirt's significance by reframing it as "unofficial basically bootleg t-shirt with a very limited run that was massively sensationalised by the press". These comments show a contest over meaning, where audiences draw on their own cultural knowledge of Christian doctrine and subcultural history to rework and challenge the dominant media narrative of sacrilege by constructing alternative mental models of the event (van Dijk 2017: 30-31).

Beneath the explicit arguments lies a conflict of habitus: the deeply ingrained dispositions that shape how social groups experience and judge the world (Bourdieu 1977: 78-87). Linking this to Smith's (2006: 66) concept of heritage as performance, which involves embodied acts and practices, suggests that the debate represents a conflict between two incompatible modes of performing heritage within the same physical space. Opponents' accounts presuppose a hexis (Bourdieu 1977: 93-94), the physical embodiment of habitus, of reverent stillness, speech restraint, and acoustic transparency suited to choral or organ literature. Proponents, in contrast, valorise tactile loudness and shared affect (Everley 2025) as a legitimate experience in a sacred interior. The clash amounts to a conflict between two incompatible ways of inhabiting a sacred space, a conflict rooted in the body and its trained dispositions rather than in propositional beliefs alone. The outrage parishioners expressed was a visceral reaction to the violation of their deeply conditioned feel for the game (Bourdieu 1977: 10-15). Indeed, reception of the event was often mediated by this sensory management. Micro choices in sound reinforcement mattered. Reviews that praised a balanced mix, with the organ leading and the band supporting, tended to report warmer responses, while reports that foregrounded staging darkness and a concert feel elicited greater offence (Connell 2025b). Symphonic metal's characteristic orchestral textures and clean vocal lines also served as a legitimating bridge because the subgenre's proximity to

classical forms and textures softened the transgressive associations that a death or black metal act would have carried. These material and sonic differences help explain why negotiated readings emerged when reporters made technical details explicit, as the perceived respect for the organ's acoustic authority could soften the initial sense of transgression (Kahn-Harris 2007: 121-139).

Not all resistance was reduced to elitism. Some critics accepted inclusion aims but objected to specific content or the timing within the liturgical calendar. Others accepted amplified concerts if presented as secular culture distinct from worship, or if policies specified repertoire and boundaries. These positions suggest that opposition is not always a defence of high culture but can also be a negotiation over the specific terms of inclusion. This negotiation highlights that even in the inclusion/elitism debate, the details of execution are crucial to how the event was perceived by different publics. Conversely, if inclusion reads as instrumental, its moral claim weakens and it becomes euphemistic (Bourdieu 1986: 243). These nuances matter for the next axis, where the mission of community conflicts with the practical realities of running the institution.

Community vs. Commercialism

The tension between the public-facing mission and the underlying financial reality leads to the third and final axis of debate: the opposition between community and commercialism frames. While the material pressures of church maintenance were established as a precondition for the event, public discourse shows a contest over the legitimacy of those pressures. Supporters described the concert as a civic gift and a means of sustainable heritage stewardship. Opponents, however, read the same facts as evidence that market logic is encroaching on a sacred field. The friction played out in how financial figures were framed and how the public decoded the relationship between the two.

Over the last decade, cathedrals and some larger parish churches have broadened their programming to reach publics who will not attend a service (Halliday 2025) and to generate income that underwrites worship and conservation (Connell 2025a). Examples that recur in coverage include late openings, light installations, film screenings, and dance or music nights, sometimes dubbed "rave in the nave" (Lilley 2025b). York Minster is no exception, having hosted, for example, Damon Albarn in 2021 (Connell 2025d), frontman of the English rock bands Blur and Gorillaz. Metal, though, carries a stigma that light installations and singer-songwriter concerts do not (see Rowe 2018: 8-14; Lizardo 2025). Its association with transgression (Kahn-Harris 2007) means that a commercial frame imports not just market logic but a perceived moral affront, which explains why the stewardship argument had to work harder here than in previous Minster programming. The institutional turn shows pressure on the religious field (Bourdieu 1993: 38-39). Specifically, the sacred field's traditional autonomy, which professes a disinterest in worldly economics, is strained by the heteronomous logic of the market. To manage this tension, institutional actors frame the shift as stewardship by presenting revenue as a means to achieve their mission. Such framing aligns with Smith's (2006: 88) observation that the technical process of management itself is a cultural performance that creates value and meaning. It works to legitimise economic activity within the heritage field. The tension between popular music's

commercial logic and heritage's disinterested logic has broader parallels in what Andy Bennett (2009) termed the "heritagisation" of rock, where popular music acquires institutional legitimacy through museums, halls of fame, and heritage trails, a process that generates its own legitimacy contests.

In the York Minster case, this stewardship frame was deployed through three complementary discourses. The *sacred* discourse, voiced by clergy, built upon the "welcome" framing discussed earlier, locating the rationale in the language of a gift. The Dean, for example, extended his missional logic by adding: "we create this space to gift it to others, that they too may find God's glory within our walls" (Connell 2025a). This framing language presents the ticketed event as an act of hospitality, which reframes commercial activity as service to the institution's founding purpose.

Second, Mynett articulated a *secular* discourse by reframing the church's purpose beyond the liturgical and arguing for its necessity as a community asset. By aligning the project with campaigns to protect churches as "valuable cultural assets" that can serve as "warm hubs", he contended that their purpose extends beyond Sunday worship into the civic realm (BBC Radio York 2025). He made this strategy explicit, stating: "This isn't a faith-based perspective, because I'm not a Christian; it's about the value to the UK of these churches" (Connell 2025d).

Finally, the musicians employed a *practice-based* discourse by justifying the project as an act of preservation rather than provocation, echoing the stewardship argument. They framed the project's purpose as a secular effort to preserve valuable cultural heritage embodied by the church and its organ (Connell 2025d). This third voice adds a rationale focused on material care to the clergy's spiritual mission and Mynett's civic argument.

Theoretically, this consistent framing of mission and gift can be understood as a discursive strategy of euphemisation (Bourdieu 1986: 243) and a broader set of legitimation strategies (van Dijk 2008: 39-41). It translates the heteronomous pressure of economic necessity into the legitimate, disinterested language of the cultural field by invoking mission, heritage, and community. It also attempts to define the event within a gift economy (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 62-67). In this moral framework, the transaction's success is measured not by its commercial value (price) but its social worth (community building, heritage preservation). By framing the concert as a gift that enables the continued gifting of the cathedral to the public, proponents sought to position the commercial aspect as a virtuous and necessary component of stewardship.

Critics and sceptical journalists anchored their objections in the language of money to reverse this stewardship frame. Their discourse often began by establishing the Minster's financial pressures to create a context of economic crisis. Local coverage repeatedly cited that the Minster "costs more than £33,000 a day to run" (Connell 2025c) and faced "financial pressures connected to inflation and the increase in price of energy" (Connell 2025c), while national press linked such "unconventional events" to the need "to keep their doors open" (Ludlow 2025) and noted the cathedral's running costs of "nearly £4 million a year" (Ludlow 2025). Using hard figures immediately primed a commercial reading of any new initiative and allowed a sceptical columnist to state bluntly: "The reason the gig is happening at all is because of money. The Minster is addicted to the stuff" (Salter 2025). This

journalistic framing intentionally dismissed the missional arguments and presented the motivation as purely financial.

The sequencing of information in media reports was central to this framing effect. Headlines leading with money primed this reading even when the body of the article later turned to mission (Ludlow 2025; Connell 2025a). When cost figures appeared in the standfirst, the story was framed as a budget problem with cultural window dressing. When mission appeared first and money later, it was easier for audiences to interpret revenue as stewardship.

Parishioners connected this financial argument to a breach of the sacred field's integrity. Their discourse translated the journalists' commercial framing into a moral one. One parishioner argued that faith was "not a commodity to be traded for contemporary relevance or ticket sales" (Halliday and Vinter 2025), while another drew a hard line: "York Minster is a symbol of faith, not a commercial venue" (Finan 2025). The core argument is categorical: even if revenue supports conservation, critics felt the means compromise the end, which risks a shift in the Minster's core identity from a cathedral to a venue.

The opposition defended the field's autonomy and its independence from worldly economics against the intrusion of heteronomous market logic (Bourdieu 1993: 38-40). For these critics, selling tickets for a metal concert violated the site's moral economy (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 52-53). From their perspective, converting the cathedral's sacred worth, a quality on which one cannot put a price, into quantifiable economic value compromised its integrity.

The same facts supported opposing morals. Such polyvalence creates the dissonance inherent when heritage is created through interpretation (Smith 2006: 80). Supporters used the widely quoted £33,000 per day figure to justify experimentation as responsible stewardship (for example, Connell 2025c) while opponents used it to indict it as a sign that money has become the master (for example, Salter 2025). Church closure and organ loss statistics functioned similarly: for proponents, they licensed recontextualisation; for opponents, they were a call to protect dignity, not to intensify novelty. This polyvalence suggests that the framing of the facts was more influential than the facts themselves in shaping public understanding. Media coverage suggests that when risk and gift lead, it is easier for audiences to reframe commercialisation as stewardship; when finance leads, mission is more likely to read as public relations. The sequence does not merely inform; it steers.

Yet the media's framing strategies did not determine reception. In the participatory discussions on Reddit, users frequently produced negotiated readings that surpassed the simple binaries presented in institutional and journalistic discourse (Hall 1980: 60). While the positive reception in the r/symphonicmetal thread shows a community accepting the dominant inclusion frame at face value, the broader discussion in r/unitedkingdom was more sceptical. Many Redditors rejected the official mission narrative by reframing the event through a pragmatic lens focused on commerce. As one user put it: "They're doing it or [sic] their own volition to make money. Money changers are running the temple". Another argued that such events are necessary because "noone [sic] wants to fill the collection plate" and the church needed to "keep the building going", while a third articulated this pragmatic acceptance in terms of heritage preservation: "Yes the Church is

dying, but I don't want to lose the building". This pragmatic acceptance is a negotiated position that accepts the legitimacy of the concert but rejects the institution's preferred framing of inclusivity by substituting it with a more cynical, but ultimately supportive, economic rationale (Hall 1980). The decoding practice demonstrates the public's capacity to see through the euphemisation (Bourdieu 1986: 243) of economic motives. They acknowledge the material reality that underpins the cultural field's claims of disinterestedness. This decoding practice may reflect the pragmatic perspective of "common religion" which exists outside institutional disciplines and official justifications (Davie 1994: 76-77).

The pragmatic acceptance was not unconditional, though. In both media commentary and participatory threads, some voices articulated a "both-and" position, which suggests that revenue generation is compatible with sacred purpose when programming is carefully curated. The analysis indicates that clear boundary setting, through specific policies on content and timing, coupled with transparency on how proceeds support conservation and worship, can increase negotiated acceptance among sceptical publics.

Jenkins and colleagues' language of moral economy helps name the breach critics perceived. Critics saw the cathedral's worth as measured by price, which converted a gift into a commodity (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 62-67). Proponents retained the lexicon of gift to contest this reading. They "gift it to others" and share the building's beauty while arguing that the proceeds generated enable the gift to continue (Connell 2025a). The gift frame appealed to the long-term logic of symbolic profit associated with social capital reproduction (community, heritage), whereas critics imposed the short-term logic of economic profit (Bourdieu 1993: 71-72). The dispute thus turned on subordination: is money the means that protects sacred purpose, or has sacred purpose become the means to raise money? Field theory reframes the same question as a conflict between autonomy and heteronomy: how far can a sacred field admit external logics without losing the basis of its own legitimacy (Bourdieu 1993: 38-40)?

Conclusion

The three analytical axes converge on a single structural insight, that is, genre legitimacy is relationally produced through encounters between cultural fields rather than residing as an inherent property of the music itself. The York Minster case concentrates dynamics that are diffused in concert halls and festival sites, or nowadays streaming platforms. The heritage authority is ancient and formally consecrated; the metal genre is the one most consistently excluded from cultural tolerance (Bryson 1996; Lizardo 2025; Rowe 2018: 8-14); and the audience decoding takes place across both broadcast and participatory media simultaneously. The case is thus a limit-test of popular music's institutional legitimacy, and the analysis extends metal music studies scholarship on controversy and boundary-making (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine 2011) into the setting of sacred heritage (Davie 1994).

First, declining church attendance endangers heritage assets like the organ, which, in turn, prompts a disruptive recontextualisation to recruit attention. Second,

newsrooms encode the event as a conflict, which publics then decode and recirculate online (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). The ability of these networked publics to decode and recirculate represents a challenge to traditional media gatekeeping in the hybrid media system. It shows that institutional framing competes with grassroots interpretation and makes visible how that competition unfolds. Within this media cycle, two factors proved salient: institutional endorsement tended to shift the media tone towards acceptance, while the blasphemy-by-association trope, a discursive device with documented parallels in other religion-metal controversies (Guibert and Sklower 2011; Vrzal 2022), enabled a symbolic policing of the cultural field. Across these debates, classed taste hierarchies shaped arguments over inclusion, while financial figures supported opposing morals. Participatory discourse on Reddit often attenuated sacrilege by reframing the debate in pragmatic terms. Finally, this process enables the conversion of capital. The cathedral's prestige legitimises a popular form, and in turn, popular attention flows back to the institution in a way that repositions the organ as a living instrument rather than a museum object (Smith 2006). The outcomes are contingent, with any transferability conditional on institutional leadership and communications, shaped by the local moral economy.

These findings have practical implications. Institutions should curate boundary conditions in advance and communicate them clearly. Decisions about repertoire and timing should separate cultural programming from worship while signalling respect for the space without diluting the contemporary art being hosted. Because the order in which warrants appear primes readers' interpretations, public communication should lead with heritage risk and social value rather than with cost figures. Audio engineering decisions should make the organ audible as an organ within the collaboration, so that sceptical listeners can hear acoustic authority rather than only amplified spectacle. Reporting cycles, meanwhile, should document how proceeds support conservation and open access, as trust depends on the visible conversion of revenue into shared goods. Finally, institutions should listen to where publics talk. These participatory forums are diagnostic spaces in which negotiated positions appear and where small policy adjustments might produce measurable shifts in acceptance. Institutional endurance may depend not just on managing capital conversions but on learning to listen carefully to the publics that form in these participatory spaces.

The York Minster collaboration suggests that heritage remains alive when it is experienced and argued over. The controversy exemplifies Smith's (2006: 44) core thesis that heritage is often an intangible cultural process centred on the present-day negotiation of meaning, identity, value, and belonging, not just the preservation of past material objects according to authorised principles. Popular music here acted as a civic device for renegotiating what sacred spaces are for, who they are for, and how they can be sustained in a secularising society. The noise matters. It is the amplified sound within the nave, and it is the discursive hum beyond it, where readers and listeners learn how to value, or to refuse, what they have been shown. For institutions contending with declining belonging (Davie 1994), the lesson is not to close the doors or to seek silence. Rather, they must host purposeful collisions that cultivate care, doing so with clarity and sustained attention to the publics whose authorisation underwrites their future. For heritage to remain alive, it cannot

remain silent; managed, meaningful clamour is the price of twenty-first-century relevance.

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