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Editorial: Meet the new editorial team

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The first issue of *IASPM Journal* in 2026 is an open issue; it is also the first issue edited independently by a new editorial team of four: Ann Werner, Sudiipta Dowsett, Sangheon Lee and Nassos Polyzoidis. In this editorial we present ourselves, our plans and aims for the coming three years with *IASPM Journal* and provide an overview of the articles included in the first issue of 2026.

Meet the editorial team

The editorial team for 2026-2028 consists of four people: Ann Werner, Sudiipta Dowsett, Sangheon Lee and Nassos Polyzoidis. Ann Werner (Professor in Musicology, Uppsala University, Sweden) is the editor and she has overall responsibility for the journal. A member of IASPM Norden since 2007, she served on the executive committee of IASPM International for two periods, and on the ethics committee for one, before taking on the role as editor of *IASPM Journal*. Werner's research interests lie in the intersections of music, gender and media. She has published on for example power, gender and race in music streaming and algorithmic culture, the uses of popular music in girl culture, and the equality work of the music industries after #MeToo. Her work draws on cultural and feminist theory and in the past few years she has conducted research projects about how institutions of music operate, both in higher music education and the performing arts.

Sudiipta Dowsett (Casual Academic at the University of New South Wales, Australia and from June 2026, Research Fellow in Ethnomusicology, University of Cologne, Germany) is an assistant editor, managing incoming submissions for the journal and supporting peer review for manuscripts within her areas of expertise. A member of IASPM Australia/New Zealand branch since 2018, Dowsett's research draws on collaborative, co-designed, and ethnographic methods to explore the decolonial capacities of hip hop as embodied practice in South Africa and Australia, highlighting its critical role in maintaining and revitalising Indigenous Ancestral modes of vocality and being. Her publications are grounded in anthropology and focus on embodiment in music performance contexts, intergenerational knowledge transfer, place-making and ecosomatics.

Sangheon Lee (Senior Research Fellow (Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions), University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom) is an assistant editor, contributing to the journal's efforts to broaden its linguistic and regional scope, drawing on his multilingual and transnational academic background. Originally from South Korea, he studied and worked in France for thirteen years before relocating to the UK. He also reads German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian. Lee's research focuses on musical form, temporality, and philosophy in Anglo-American, Russian, and Central and Eastern European punk and post-punk contexts, with particular attention to themes such as nihilism, urgency, individualism, and asceticism. He is a member of IASPM UK & Ireland and Francophone Europe branches, and serves on the Executive Committee of IASPM International as Membership Secretary.

Nassos Polyzoidis (Adjunct Professor, University of Ioannina, Greece) is an assistant editor of *IASPM Journal*, supporting the journal's technical processes, platform management, and publication workflows. He teaches in the areas of popular and jazz music studies. His research focuses on the intersections of blues, *rebetiko*, and jazz, with particular emphasis on cross-cultural musical forms, harmony, rhythm, and performance practices. His work combines analytical approaches to structure and harmony with performance-based perspectives, and engages with questions of genre, identity, and intercultural exchange, including aspects of language and lyrical practice. He is an active member of the IASPM UK

& Ireland, and his current work spans both scholarly research and songwriting, drawing on and recombining elements from these traditions.

In 2025 the new editorial team worked together with the previous editorial team on issue 15 2 to promote learning-by-doing. By co-publishing the final issue of 2025, the new team acquired detailed knowledge of the work process and the platform *IASPM Journal* operated on. Working in the editorial team of *IASPM Journal* is something the team does in addition to their day jobs and without remuneration. Through the early stages of this editorial team's period, the team has taken time to get to know each other, get to know the board serving the journal, and discuss the priorities for the coming three years. *IASPM Journal* is a journal by and for the members of IASPM: therefore, we want it to mirror the different branches, disciplines, research topics, musics, methods, contexts, cultures and identities of IASPM. We aim to promote inclusivity across disciplines by expanding the word limit to a broader range: from 6,000-8,000 to 6,000-10,000 words (from May 2026), recognising that popular music studies scholars work in different fields that follow distinct publishing traditions and conventions. The journal's research tradition, largely shaped by Anglophone scholars, has made undeniably significant contributions, while also pointing to the need to further widen the scope of the journal and popular music studies at large. This has been addressed in several ways. For some time, it has been possible to publish in other languages than English in *IASPM Journal*. This is a policy we get questions about, but few articles are submitted in languages other than English and we would like to make this possibility more known. Further, we have welcomed special issues for 2027 and 2028 (see our latest cfp on the website) that aim to widen both the topics and the regions in focus.

To be inclusive is not an easy task. Cultural theorists have argued that being included, as inclusion is operationalised in diversity work, risks making women and racialised others tokens of an institution's success in being diverse while the norms excluding them remain in place (Ahmed 2012). Examining the spaces that create insiders, and invaders, means we have to investigate and critique the material and discursive rules that make some bodies feel out of place (Puwar 2004). This uneasy inclusion does not automatically challenge how power operates in a field—just because the representations become more diverse. Therefore, structural change for the journal, and systematic work with tools like language, word count, special issues and (possibly) a new essay format, we hope, will be more efficient to promote inclusion than any ambition or written policy.

Despite the ambitions of the editorial team, we still receive the submissions that come in—and we would like them to come from a wider range of places, persons, disciplines, and cover more popular musics. We invite everyone reading this editorial to consider which researchers and topics should be more present in *IASPM Journal*: and we encourage you to consider submitting this work to the journal. At the international IASPM conference in Paris we saw many new faces from around the world, and many younger scholars. We wish that they submit their work to us.

We do not want to claim the focus on inclusion to be new—work has been initiated by several editorial teams before us. Still, we aim to develop the strategies further. We will continue balancing between open issues and special issues, and all special issues will have an open section.

The first issue of 2026

Contributors to 16 1 represent different disciplines and are from different parts of the world. The issue includes such diverse methods as music theory and ethnography mirroring both an interest in the music itself and in the uses and circulations of popular music. This reflects a continued dialogue between analytical approaches centred on musical structure and those engaging with the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of popular music. Further, we hope that the issue points towards an ongoing effort within individual studies not simply to juxtapose these dimensions but to explore how each may render the other legible, contributing to the more demanding task of "deciphering the social within music itself", as suggested by Adorno (2014) in *Ideen zur Musiksoziologie*.

The first article Bamle analyses how musical genre affects the expression of environmental sensibilities in contemporary song lyrics. Heavy metal and indie folk are concluded to be differently attuned towards environmental themes, with artists pursuing different lyric strategies to address issues like global warming and species extinction. Examining songs by heavy metal band Gojira and indie folk band First Aid Kit, Gojira's songs reveal that the power aesthetics of heavy metal can accommodate explicitly environmental lyrics. Analysis of First Aid Kit lyrics show that indie folk songs can rely on an associative poetics generating environmental nostalgia, even without direct lyrical reference to environmental issues.

Herbst analyses the media and public discourse surrounding the symphonic metal concert *Organic Metal: Two Worlds Collide*, performed by Plague of Angels at York Minster. Drawing on critical discourse analysis of new coverage alongside netnographic engagement with online discussions, the article examines how the event became a site for negotiating the meanings and legitimacy of popular music within a sacred heritage setting. The analysis highlights tensions between heritage and sacrilege, inclusion and elitism, and community mission and commercialisation. In doing so, it shows how genre boundaries are contested when metal enters institutional spaces historically associated with religious authority, and how these debates unfold across both media narratives and participatory publics.

The following two contributions engage with musical temporality, addressing different questions through the circulation of sonic signs and the organisation of time within musical form. Bannister examines the "telegraphic anaphone" in 1960s–1970s popular music, drawing on Tagg and Clarida's musematic analysis to explore how rapid, monotonal patterns associated with Morse code function as sonic representations of media "noise". Engaging with McLuhan's media theory, the article traces how this device mediates musical structure and signifies technological change, urgency, and communication. Through a series of case studies, Bannister demonstrates how the motif evolves across different musical and cultural contexts, from Motown and Nashville to European electronic music, before re-emerging in punk and hip hop.

Collins revisits the concept of golden section proportionality by extending its application from score-based classical analysis to the temporal organisation of recorded popular music. Critiquing bar-counting methodologies, he proposes an alternative approach based on elapsed time, through which key expressive

moments can be identified. Drawing on six case studies of works by Jacob Collier, the article demonstrates how such moments closely correspond to calculated golden section points, thereby rethinking musical proportion in relation to production practices and digital compositional environments.

Ekici employs inductive thematic analysis to examine democratisation in music production 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 power dynamics. Using data from 34 qualitative interviews with professionals, the study highlights the factors slowing down CMP's adaptation to technology. The article argues that democratisation of CMP would require cultural shifts and educational reforms, and that adoption of select PMP innovations could help.

Davidjants, Raju and Dundua analyse music activism through a non-representational approach, focusing on the Tallinn, Estonia branch of Rhythms of Resistance (ROR), an international anticapitalist network of percussion bands. They examine how music as embodied practice, along with the ethics of care localised in ROR Tallinn, generate affect and social relations that sustain endurance within social movements. They argue that these dynamics, alongside a distributed leadership model enact the movement's political aspirations beyond the transmission of a political message.

In "Back to the Future", O'Grady draws on practice research to explore the role of "popular music imagination" in the songwriting process, with a focus on 1980s aesthetics. Through analysis and reflection on both his own creative process and the experiences of well-known songwriters and popular songs he traces the interplay between imagined production capacities and genre aesthetics shapes studio-based composition, framing composition, production and recording as fluid and intertwined processes. In doing so, the article contributes to the emerging field of songwriting studies in popular music.

Finally, the issue includes two reviews and one report, each engaging with different dimensions of contemporary popular music studies. The reviews address recent publications from distinct but overlapping perspectives: one offers a sustained methodological reflection on current research practices in the field, interrogating the assumptions and limits underlying a wide range of analytical approaches, while the other examines the role of music journalism in shaping historical narratives and critical discourse around electronic music and technological innovation. Taken together, they highlight ongoing tensions between methodological reflexivity, historiography, and the mediation of musical knowledge across academic and non-academic contexts.

The report on the 2025 IASPM conference reflects on emerging intellectual directions within the field, identifying a renewed focus on recording as a central object of analysis, alongside broader concerns in mediation, technology, and the conditions under which music is produced, circulated, and understood. It further points to the increasingly polycentric character of popular music studies, marked by the growing presence of scholars from beyond traditional anglophone centres and the expansion of the field's conceptual and geographical horizons.

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The Effect of Genre on Environmental Popular Song Lyrics

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Abstract

This article examines how musical genre affects the expression of environmental sensibilities in contemporary song lyrics. Heavy metal and indie folk are differently attuned towards environmental themes, and artists in each genre pursue different lyric strategies to address issues like global warming and species extinction. This article examines songs by heavy metal band Gojira and indie folk band First Aid Kit to discover how genre conventions impact the environmental meaning potential of lyrics. Gojira's songs reveal that the power aesthetics of heavy metal can accommodate explicitly environmental lyrics. First Aid Kit show that indie folk songs can rely on an associative poetics generating environmental nostalgia even without direct lyrical reference to environmental issues. Attention to how meaning is generated on the level of genre will expand our understanding of the role of song lyrics in promoting environmentalism to music fans.

KEYWORDS: song lyrics, Gojira, extreme metal, First Aid Kit, indie folk

Introduction

Song lyrics express environmental sentiments on three levels: 1) the lyric words themselves, 2) the musical performance, that is, the situation of lyric words in a musical composition, either performed live or recorded, 3) the social and historical context, that is, the framing and reception of song lyrics at the time of initial release or in subsequent iterations during live performances, use of recordings in various media contexts, and recontextualizations across different times and places. As a

source of meaning, lyrics are taken for granted. Yet as a source of music's political force the role of song lyrics is unclear (1). Although lyrics matter to music fans, their interpretation of meaning does not stem from hearing words in isolation. Several scholars have pointed out that words are easily misheard in the context of music (Kramer 2002; Weinstein 2006). Depending on the genre, some people who experience music at a concert will hardly be paying attention to the words at all. The meaning of words in music is often associative rather than direct, and associative meaning may be more reliant on context than on lyric words alone. For song lyrics to be politically viable, they must work on the listener in tandem with the musical performance and the historical moment.

Lyrics become meaningful in the context of expectations established and maintained as genre conventions. Whether the words in a song are clearly political, apparently apolitical, or express ambiguous political content, genre imbues the words with a particular rhetorical force towards certain political topics. It can also deprive the words of such force. Musical accompaniments provide additional meaning that may support (or obstruct) a political reception of lyrical content. Artists, however, seldom choose their genre for political reasons. The communication of messages as such is rarely the goal of the masters of style. Nevertheless, there seems to be a special affinity between environmentalism and certain genres. It has been suggested by scholars such as David Ingram (2010) and Mark Pedelty (2012) that music genres are differently attuned to the sentiments of environmentalism. The analyses in this article support the impression that some genres more easily lend themselves to highlight environmentalist tropes. Conversely, some genres may have a constraining effect on lyrics that make it difficult to produce environmental sentiment.

According to musicologist Alexander Rehding, there are two main ways through which music responds to climate change: apocalypse and nostalgia (Rehding 2011). These are not the only types of environmental response we can find in popular music, but these tropes have a privileged position in environmental discourse (2). Accordingly, it is likely that genres that serve an aesthetic of apocalypse or nostalgia will more readily combine with a lyrical theme of climate change. Heavy metal has a tradition of apocalyptic symbolism, so it may come as no surprise that "environ-metal" has become a thing (Skylar 2012). Climate apocalypse fits the theme of unavoidable collective suffering that is typical of extreme heavy metal (Morris 2014: 556; Lucas 2019: 492). Similarly, indie folk, a genre which cultivates nostalgia, has become one of the most prevalent and evocative genres of environmentalism (Bamle 2024). However, while both genres are equipped to highlight environmental tropes, their aspirations to politics or social change are questionable. Extreme metal is notoriously apolitical because it usually leans so far into suffering and despair so as not to offer any solutions (Phillipov 2012; Lucas 2019). Similarly, indie folk's evocation of nostalgia can serve fantasies of escape into a pastoral past rather than stir confrontation with real issues. Whether commercial music has any effect on environmental politics ultimately depends on its ability to generate affect that can be mobilized towards social change. Therefore, the rhetorical effect of genre on environmental song lyrics should be examined more closely. How do popular music genres differ in terms of environmental lyrical content?

Method

The goal of this article is to examine one specific aspect of the rhetorics of genre: the influence of musical performance on the meaning potential of lyric words (3). To target this aspect, I follow a line of rhetorical inquiry which is circumscribed by the more common approaches of lyric studies and sociomusicology.

Studies of lyrics usually rely on close reading, or "close listening" in the case of performed lyrics (Bernstein 1998). Close listening means being attuned to the ways in which lyrics and performance may support or subvert one another. Aspects of the performing voice and artist-audience interactions are crucial (Novak 2012). In the case of recorded songs, close listening should also consider aspects of mediality, composition and musical texture (Moore 2012). In contrast to written lyric poetry, however, song lyrics are imbued with unique meaning potential as they are construed by audiences through the interpretive frame of musical genre (Eckstein 2010). Importantly, close listening cannot entirely capture the effect of musical genre on song lyrics. Music is not denotative. As stated by Fabian Holt, it "does not have the precision of iconic or indexical representation even when it accompanies words" (Holt 2007: 5). Its significance to the listener is based on cultural and intertextual references that go beyond any individual text and moment of performance. Close listening must therefore be supplemented by a contextualizing analytical framework which considers the expanded social and cultural significance of genre.

The role of genre in determining the meaning of popular music has most often been explored sociologically, by examining how music relates to socially organized "genre worlds" (Frith 1996: 35-42) or organizational structures of the music industry (Negus 1999). Christopher Small argues that music should be regarded as an act in which musical meaning is co-created by everyone who relates to a performance in any capacity (Small 1998: 9). The act of "musicking" establishes relationships between the people taking part, and it can "model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world" (Small 1998: 13). This may be why some genres become closely associated with specific cultural tropes such as apocalypse or pastoral. Jennifer Lena (2012) similarly notes how genres project and aspire to an idealized world, but with the added emphasis that the ideal relationships established in genres may be altered over time as genres follow different trajectories based on stages of development of various musical communities.

Sociological knowledge has a place in all studies of popular music genre, including this one. However, since I am looking for the effect of genre not on an audience reception per se (nor on genre discourse itself), but on song lyrics, and specifically on political/environmental contents in popular songs, I favor here a rhetorical approach. Where rhetorics is concerned with effective communication, genre can be considered a framework that exerts influence on a song's communicative possibilities. As John Frow writes, "genre is one of the ways in which texts seek to control the uncertainty of communication" (Frow 2015: 4). This statement presents genre as more than a set of aesthetic patterns across different songs, but as a shorthand for the connections between the textual and cultural levels

of songs, and thus a key to the hermeneutics of music. A rhetorical approach maintains that genre is a contributing factor to the effect of musical texts on real-world political situations.

Selection

Two genres will be explored through case examinations of songs by heavy metal band Gojira and indie folk band First Aid Kit. Together these can illustrate how genre conventions impact the possibilities for meaningful environmental lyrics. Rephrasing the initial research question to accommodate these case examples we can ask: What is the role of heavy metal, in the case of Gojira, and indie folk, in the case of First Aid Kit, in establishing an environmentalist framework for the performance and reception of song lyrics? To answer this question, we must first examine what meaning potential is generally generated in each genre, before more closely examining the song lyrics of each artist in light of their respective genre and political/environmental historical context.

Genres are defined by patterns of performance practice with which artists and audiences engage. They are not simply governed by a "definite set of rules", as many have assumed based on Franco Fabbri's famous definition of musical genre (Fabbri 1981: 52). Rather, genres are conceptualized on the basis of their component texts, which, as David Brackett reminds us, do not "belong" to genres with stability, but rather participate in them, reproducing and altering them through a dynamic process of repetition and differentiation (Brackett 2016: 13). Indeed, music is hardly created nor consumed within strict and stable genre boundaries. As Robert Walser notes in his study of many related styles within the umbrella of heavy metal: "Nowhere are genre boundaries more fluid than in popular music (…) musicians are ceaselessly creating new fusions and extensions of popular genres" (Walser 1993: 27). Each performance and each informal discussion among fans about good or bad music is part of genre negotiations which may slightly adjust what is considered appropriate to a given genre. Nevertheless, Walser continues, "musical structures and experiences are intelligible only with respect to these historically developing discursive systems" (ibid.). That is to say that genre alone may not establish musical meaning, and a rigid focus on genre may limit attention to artistic innovation in many songs. Yet each style of music is shaped by historical situations which connect artists and audiences on a perceived common ground of musical expression, forming expectations about which elements are appropriate to composition, performance, and consumption in order to share in a meaningful musical interaction. Genre determines certain expectations to which both artists and audiences respond. Via adherence to genre conventions (as we will see in the examples below), songs evoke certain meanings by association with an admittedly fluid and changing genre field. Navigating music in terms of the genre context of songs, which allows artists and audiences to break away from conventions or to defend their musical taste is usually a matter of identifiable conventions in a vast system of various genre constellations.

Obviously, no artist is entirely representative of their genre, but being situated clearly within established genre discourses, the selected songs are representative of

necessary negotiations between their climate conscious messages and their genres more broadly. As explained by Tzvetan Todorov, the relationship between a work and its genre is of a probabilistic nature. There is no necessity that a work will incarnate its genre and follow the rules, there is only a probability (Todorov 1973: 22). Similarly, there may be no compulsion for environmentally engaged musical artists to write environmental songs, but it is likely that their songs will be interpreted in light of such activism and may consequently have an environmental effect all the same. The two bands I have selected for this study are both representative and singular as participants in (the ongoing production of) their respective genre discourses. Besides being among the most popular in their genres, both bands have strong connections to the environmental movement through events, festivals, or otherwise contributing to organizations which highlight and work to combat environmental destruction.

The genres examined here are both historically derived from the loosely defined umbrella of rock. Both genres cultivate an alternative to what is perceived as the cultural mainstream (even though each genre has historically passed through the very mainstream they seek to transgress). They contrast in terms of their respective "hard" and "soft" performance styles, each of which represents a musical strategy of differentiation against a perceived mainstream and an alignment to alternative culture. This, I suggest, goes hand in hand with a variance in lyrical content. Heavy metal's focus on power and excess feeds a fascination with dark metaphysics (Walser 1993; Morris 2014; Kahn-Harris 2007). Its predilection for grandiloquence appears in references to epic and fantastic literature. With a tradition of profane iconography, the genre is no stranger to apocalyptic symbolism. Indie folk's muted timbres with a focus on strummed guitar and vocal harmonies evokes quite a different set of associations. Scholars of the genre have noted that its compositions characteristically exhibit the desire to retreat from modern urban life, to connect with what is conceived as an authentic past through natural landscapes and musical conventions from orally transmitted folk music repertoires (Bamle 2022; Coleman 2017; Mitchell 2017; Størvold 2023; van Poecke 2017). Indie folk lyrics commonly demonstrate anxieties about contemporary life, relating feelings of uncertainty and helplessness in the face of a present crisis (Coleman 2017). Often referencing remote locations, and aesthetically linked to both wilderness and rural landscapes, the genre evokes pastoral scenes. Such scenes become the setting for introspective reflection, making the genre a fertile setting for exploring the eco-utopian potential of music (Ingram 2010: 52). Although the strategies taken to address crisis is different, the environmental crisis imposes itself on all musical genres. In the following I will examine more closely how song lyrics unfold within the interpretive frameworks of each respective genre.

Case 1, Environmental heavy metal: Gojira's *From Mars to Sirius* (2005)

"Real content, real style" are words used by metal journalist D.X. Ferris to describe Gojira's 2005 breakthrough record *From Mars to Sirius* (Ferris 2009). The quote praises the album for its ability to bring the substance of environmental issues to heavy metal without sacrificing the elements that make the genre appealing to fans

in the first place. With Joe Duplantier on vocals and rhythm guitar, Mario Duplantier on drums, Christian Andreu on lead guitar, and Jean-Michel Labadie on bass, the band's style is firmly positioned within the extreme metal subgenre of heavy metal, with momentary departures into progressive and death metal. The music characteristically features displays of technical virtuosity through electric guitar shredding, double kick "blast beat" drumming, and a certain style of growling, that is, hoarsely screamed vocals. The vocal style is of particular importance to the bearing of lyrics. In Gojira's songs, the cadence of the singer will often follow the lead guitar rather than a natural prosody. This emphasis on stylized vocals can have the effect that words are particularly difficult to make out. It is perhaps a paradox that metal fans place such a strong emphasis on lyrics. Occasionally, growling can be replaced by singing in a deep register, serving dramatic tension and perspectival change. Gojira's lyrics, as is typical for the genre, mix images from Christianity, pagan mythologies and fantasy literature, and use both symbols and description to create a sense of overpowering psychological and cosmic forces. This builds an aesthetic that is simultaneously powerful and threatening.

What sets Gojira apart from other extreme metal bands from the early 2000s, is their ability to shape their lyrics into meaningful, politically oriented environmental narratives, without departing from the staples of the genre. Heavy metal music signifies cultural transgression. Its various subgenres exist along a continuum where extreme metal, as the name implies, lies at one end, emphasizing apocalyptic and misanthropic lyrics (Kahn-Harris 2007: 34). Misanthropy, according to Keith Kahn-Harris, involves "a determined effort to set oneself apart from the world" (ibid.: 40). Gravitating towards nihilism (the view that human life is inconsequential) and fatalism (a sense of inevitable doom) this tendency has led to apathy towards politics, at least to human-centered politics (Phillipov 2012: 54). As an early proponent of environmental extreme metal, Gojira are breaking new ground for the affective possibilities of environmentalism in their genre. Olivia R. Lucas's study of black metal band Botanist shows how extreme metal's penchant for misanthropy has later developed into a strain with more emphasis on posthumanist, biocentric environmentalism (Lucas 2019). Gojira, in contrast, have not given up on humanity. Their lyrics approach environmental issues from a human perspective throughout the album, albeit while constantly challenging environmentally destructive human-centered assumptions about the world.

From Mars to Sirius's cover art is inspired by the logo of the marine conservation organization Sea Shepherd, an organization the band actively supports. The logo depicts a whale, which on the album cover is taken out of the ocean and placed in front of a nondescript planet, transforming it into a "flying whale", a key image in the album's song lyrics. The album opens with whale sounds, and these periodically reoccur throughout the album as a reminder of this image. The sounds combine with sections of calm, acoustic instrumentation, creating an atmospheric contrast to the aggressive extreme metal which dominates the album. This use of contrasting instrumentation and mood creates compositional movements, underscoring a narrative in the lyrics, and reminds the listener that individual songs serve a larger meaning when interpreted collectively (a typical concept album structure). However, not all the lyrics can be easily integrated in a narrative structure. The first

half of the album is dominated by allusions to the emotional inner turmoil of a fictionalized first-person speaker, who, when approaching the halfway mark of the album, goes on an interstellar journey of self-examination. The second half of the album is less sonically intense and more atmospheric than the first half, signaling a transformation, although the music always returns to the extreme metal style suggesting a dialectic between the extremes of psychological despair and gradually emerging harmonies of ecological insight.

The story follows a person, initially overcome with despair on a burning "ocean planet" (presumably Earth, but possibly a fictionalized version of a water-filled Mars, on course for climatically induced devastation), who after encountering flying whales gains the ability to fly and goes an interstellar journey. It is not clear whether this journey is to be taken literally or is a dream of the speaker, or whether it is to be taken at face value as a fiction created by the words of the song as is suggested in the lyrics of "From Mars": "My words are the stairs I put my feet on / And I climb through starless night to my place" (Gojira 2005a). The journey itself is ultimately to be understood allegorically. This is revealed when lyrics speak directly about the state of our world. The songs that frame the album, the opening track "Ocean Planet" (Gojira 2005b) and closing track "Global Warming" (Gojira 2005c) hint that the journey between the two star systems is a journey of reflection on the state of the Earth and on humanity. On the tracks "Flying Whales" (Gojira 2005d), "In the Wilderness" (Gojira 2005e), and "World to Come" (Gojira 2005f), the speaker explicitly meditates on the state of planet Earth, and on humanity's hubris in thinking that they are in control: "Beneath the seas, I searched and had a different view / of us on Earth, the sinking ship of men" (Gojira 2005d); "Planet Earth will overcome / Men destroyed, scorned and killed their lives / But the world is on her way" (Gojira 2005e); "This is the Earth, but ages after / I know the world will overcome its pain" (Gojira 2005f).

The journey from the planet Mars to the fictional star system of Sirius C (4) corresponds with the speaker's psychological journey from a state of inner turmoil to a state of harmony. The speaker sees the society of Sirius C as an ideal that the Earth could achieve if humanity left behind its destructive ways. Joe Duplantier explained in an interview that the album title is meant to contrast Mars, who in Roman mythology is the god of war, with Sirius as symbol of peace (Dalzell 2005). In "To Sirius", the speaker faces a gradual realization of humanity's errors when he is confronted with a more advanced alien race:

> This place is a throne for brightness
> The age of war is over
> . . .
> Our force is sickening, killing all the time
> Human laws already slayed many lives
> . . .
> There was a streak of madness
> but now I know, I see it's not the only truth
> (Gojira 2005g).

Fantastical creatures provide another lyric contrast symbolic of humanity's inner conflict. Dragons (also called monsters or leviathans) representing something

uncomfortable and unresolved in the speaker's psychology, are contrasted with the flying whales (also called dolphins), representing some form of enlightenment that the speaker is seeking. In the song "Where Dragons Dwell", the dragon is a force inside the speaker: "In this region of me, a great dragon is lying" (Gojira 2005h). This force may be related to something outside, but there is no clear suggestion in this song that the dragon could be a metaphor for climate change. What is suggested is an internal battle, perhaps with despair, and with some truth (whether emotional or factual) that the speaker is resisting, unwilling to face, but from which he cannot turn away: "Now I bring evidence the beast is alive (…) When I turn my, turn my back on them, they devour me" (Gojira 2005h).

Natural elements play a key symbolic role in the lyrics. In addition to serving as mirrors of the speaker's inner psychological state, they trigger associations of environmental destruction and transformation. Furthermore, the two songs "From Mars" and "To Sirius" contain lyrics reminiscent of ecocritical concepts. The line "I have lost my reason, and I've made my sense" (Gojira 2005a) indicates an opposition between "reason" and "sense", which can be understood as a criticism of the instrumental rationality that is often seen as a driving force of environmental destruction, in favor of sensitivity towards the world as an ecosystem. This interpretation could be supported by the speaker seeking an alternative form of knowledge from the alien species, one that will align him with his "being". "I come to Sirius C to learn from your friends of old / And wish to come into being" (Gojira 2005g). In the philosophy of deep ecologists, what the speaker finds is a sense of alignment with nature as a whole. The speaker ultimately affirms that he has resolved the inner conflict after he has seen the dolphins' world and gained perspective on humanity's destructive ways: "This is my way / I've found my home / My state of real" (Gojira 2005g).

From the first few tracks on the album, it is not clear that we are dealing with the despair of a collective facing an extinction event. However, there are several stand-out songs in terms of an environmental message. "Flying Whales" references "flood on Earth" (Gojira 2005d), and "In the Wilderness" is full of descriptions of vibrant landscapes and even includes didactic passages such as "Living respectful, low your axe / and learn from the trees" (Gojira 2005e). The clearest expression of environmental resolve, however, is found on the album's closing track, titled "Global Warming". This song in a way summarizes the album, providing additional detail to the sci-fi narrative listeners have thus far experienced. In this song, the now clear-minded protagonist takes a stance of opposition to the rest of humankind, identifying instead with the natural elements: "I feel like I'm not from humankind down there / I feel like glaciers are my eyes / and mountains are my head / my heart is ocean" (Gojira 2005c). The song is a meditation on the resolve to return to the ocean planet and save it, a possibility which the protagonist considers from both sides. Following the first verse, an instrumental bridge features especially fatalistic lyrics:

> A world is down, and none can rebuild it
> Disabled lands are evolving
> My eyes are shut, a vision is dying
> My head explodes, and I fall in disgrace
> (Gojira 2005c).

Musically, this section stands out from the surrounding verses. A sudden tempo change announces a significant departure in musical texture and rhythm. The intricate, arpeggiated lead guitar riff of the verse is replaced by a spacious strumming of power chords in a much slower tempo. Whereas the first and third verses are performed with a deep chest voice, the vocalist employs the full force of the growl technique in the bridge. This vocal dynamic shows a changing emotional charge specifically related to the lyrics, suggesting that the bridge is a perspectival interlude, before the protagonist returns to level-headed meditation in the next verse. The dialectic reaches a synthesis as the main part of the song culminates in the third verse, where lyrics about hope of rebuilding and regrowing the planet are performed with the same instrumental and vocal intensity as the bridge: "Open thy eyes and let all this flow in / Now see a new hope is growing inside" (Gojira 2005c). The journey ends here, where hope is grasped but with resolve rather than resolution. The album ends on a motivational mantra repeated 13 times over two and a half minutes to the insistent guitar riff that has served as the motif of hope in this song: "We will see our children growing" (Gojira 2005c).

The titular concept of global warming is not mentioned in the song lyrics themselves, and only indirectly alluded to on the album's opening track. In engaging with lyrics, however, one cannot avoid the paratextual titles. Just like the cover art, titles inform the listening experience. Nonetheless, even without paratextual references the album is strikingly explicit in its environmental message. From the coded symbolism of natural elements to the didactic lessons from the dolphin planet, the lyrics support the narrative conclusion wherein the protagonist denounces those who continue to live in denial and resolves to see a better future. The rhetorical force of this narrative is bound to the instrumental and vocal dynamics of the genre. Intensity in the musical performance underscores the psychological turmoil expressed in some lyrics, while musically contrasting sections remind listeners both that the psychological turmoil is related to environmental issues, and that we are engaged on a journey of transformation (and possibly reconciliation) in relation to the environment. In a genre that is customarily anti-political, Gojira's lyrics thus manage to utilize the music's affective potential to advocate change.

Case 2, Environmental indie folk: First Aid Kit's "Wolf" and "The Lion's Roar" (2012)

At Climate Live in Stockholm on October 16, 2021, sisters Johanna and Klara Söderberg, who make up the indie folk duo First Aid Kit, displayed both their musical appeal and commitment to the climate movement. Before introducing speaker and generational icon Greta Thunberg to the stage, the band performed "Wolf" from their 2012 album *The Lion's Roar*. The song takes inspiration from pop

cultural stereotypes of Appalachian and Native American music, with a vocal twang and register changes that border on yodeling, interspaced with calls of "hey-ya" (First Aid Kit 2012a). Some of these stereotyped sounds are often used in popular music to recall a version of the "ecological Indian" cultural trope, a seductive and problematic essentialization of indigenous cultures, albeit a signal commonly used to criticize Western modernity from within (Garrard 2012: 129; Størvold 2025). On the recorded song, a rhythm like the slowed down gallop of a horse is played on toms and bass drum, referencing the sound of Western movies, and evoking the sound of tribal drums. The live performance in Stockholm leaves out the drumbeat, but accompanying Klara's acoustic guitar an electric keyboard (possibly a Mellotron playing a flute sound) provides an atmospheric background layer giving the song a windy texture, evoking the outdoors. The vocal is clear, and any periodic roughness is smoothed out by vocal harmonies in the chorus. The song is an indie folk hit, and the performance testifies to its environmentalist sentiments.

Indie folk stands out as a popular music genre with an environmentalist tint (Størvold 2023; Bamle 2024). The genre grew into mainstream popularity around the same time global warming became the pre-eminent environmental issue, with artists gaining mainstream success from ca. 2006 and featuring some of the biggest bands in the world by 2012 (van Poecke 2017: 15). The prominence of indie folk in the environmental movement indicates that there are properties to this genre which resonate with climate conscious audiences. Evidence of this is seen when artists usually associated with other genres approach indie folk in environmentalist performance contexts, for instance when Climate Live saw many pop artists drop electronic instruments and voice filters in favor of acoustic instruments and vocal harmonies. Mark Pedelty has noted how pop and rock tend to adopt folk qualities in environmental contexts:

> To signal environmental themes, pop musicians tend to use more subdued rhythms than usual, create simpler timbral textures, incorporate acoustic instrumentation (or electronic sampling), and either bring lead vocals up front or drop backup harmonies altogether, thus allowing the lyrics to be more clearly understood and producing a relatively spare, folk-vocal sound. (Pedelty 2012: 72).

Indie folk does not abandon electronic sound technologies, but the predominance of acoustic instruments signals a musical attempt to connect with a more primordial state of nature, as opposed to the hyper-technologized urban society whence the artists generally emerge. The way the genre utilizes vocal harmonies takes note from the music of Laurel Canyon, where the 1960s and 1970s saw urban rock artists like Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Joni Mitchell, and the Eagles, inspired by a "country roots" way of living, combine music from the American North and South, that is, combining the grand arrangements of pop with the rhythms of country music (Ingram 2010: 144f.).

Musically speaking, indie folk is a hybrid genre combining indie rock, one of many successors of the punk movement, with influences of North American folk rock and traditional music from specific geographic areas such as the Appalachian region of the United States (5). Its legacy may be charged with politics, but its stylistic predecessors had very different rhetorical strategies. Whereas punk

approached its anti-establishment ethos through aggressive music meant to deter conformists, folk was "more likely to allow for serious messages and more likely to be taken seriously" (Pedelty 2012: 143). Combining the two would give rise to an interesting synthesis, and one that we can witness in the music of some lesser-known indie folk artists (see for example my study of the Norwegian artist Moddi, Bamle 2024). However, the mainstream of indie folk does not spring directly out of these two, but from indie rock, which had already diverted from oppositional politics towards the mainstream of popular music in the 1990s (Hesmondhalgh 1999). The commercially successful strain of indie folk springs out of a culture that is introspective, stripped of the in-your-face attitudes of punk, and being less overtly political in its lyrics than folk. While the potential for political messaging is great, in practice there is little explicit politics to be found in the song lyrics of mainstream indie folk artists (6).

This does not mean that indie folk songs are devoid of politics, rather that the genre prefers an implicit lyrical approach to political issues. Indirection, symbols and allegory are supported by associations generated by the conditions and wealth of political connotations residing in the genre. Two songs by First Aid Kit exemplify the genre's underlying environmental politics. In the song "Wolf", the wolf appears as a symbol of lost connections. In the verse, the speaker sees the "wolf mother" and "wolf father" in a diminished state of being and addresses them in direct speech. The descriptions are suggestive: "You look so worn, so thin / (…) you don't smile anymore" (First Aid Kit 2012a). From the perspective of the speaker, the wolves have diverged from their natural state. The speaker calls on them to sing and run again, encouraging them to regain their stature. Addressing the animals with the familial terms ("mother" and "father"), is a gesture linking the animals as familiar or spiritually related to the speaker. This has the effect of diminishing the distance between animals and the humans engaging with this song, an effect that is intensified in the chorus.

The chorus brings a lyrical transition from direct speech addressing the wolves in the third person to a narrative told from a first-person perspective. This is also a shift from an outside perspective on nature, to the perspective of the natural world. As the speaker "run[s] through the deep dark forest", the listener enters the forest with her, beholden to a shamanistic transformation, as indicated by the speaker naming the wolf a "shapeshifter" in the verse. (In the song's music video, stereotypical "tribal" symbolism and light projections transposed onto the faces of the band underscores the symbol of shapeshifting). The scene that listeners are invited to behold is one of lost natural landscapes: "The sun would set, the trees were dead, and the rivers were none". The words in the chorus indicate that the reflection on the state of nature is set in the future. The speaker searches for a way "back home". However, the final line changes to the past tense indicating a realization that the future vision was a reflection on the present, and on the speaker herself: "There was no sound, there was only me and my disgrace". Even though the song relates a narrative moving across time, it is focalized on a lyrical speaker, making the lamentation on the state of nature simultaneously an allusion to self-criticism.

In between the verse and the chorus, the pre-chorus is the speaker's call to maintain hope that strength can be regained: "keep the spirits strong. The section serves both musically and lyrically as a liminal space, using spiritual language (for

example, "holy light, oh, burn the night") to express an uncertain hope of regained strength. The pre-chorus indicates an appeal to a higher order of natural connections, a spiritual connection that has been severed. What is in danger of being lost is not simply the natural landscapes, but the great connection between all nature, in which the human speaker relates to the animal world. Whereas the verse and chorus of the song repeat identically twice, the second iteration of the pre-chorus brings a change of words. The second time around, the speaker meditates on a voice singing of the "forgotten land". The "child of woe", presumably the singer who laments the land's fall, is called to "lend a mending hand", suggesting that the song itself can provide some comfort to both witness and nature. This marks the song as a self-reflexive elegy for the nature that will soon be lost.

David Ingram notes that the favored lyrical modes of environmentally concerned popular music have been elegy and satire:

> [B]oth explore what ecocritic Jonathan Bate calls 'the contradiction between actuality and the ideal' ([Bate] 2000, 73). The ideal tends to be a pastoral landscape in which human beings feel at home in the natural world; elegy is a lyrical meditation on its loss, and satire a denunciation of those deemed responsible for that loss (Ingram 2010: 52).

While elegy is apparent in "Wolf", there may be an element of satire as well. A decisive factor in the interpretation of "Wolf" is to decide who the lyrical "I" belongs to. Who witnesses their own "disgrace"? If it is the human speaker, listeners are invited to identify as co-responsible for the environmental destruction. On the other hand, it could be the wolf, asking for the listener's sympathy. My suggestion is that the environmental themes of "Wolf", by virtue of genre associations, carry over to other songs juxtaposed in context of the genre, on the album, and in live performances. The album's title track, "The Lion's Roar" (First Aid Kit 2012b), may be regarded as the satire which accompanies the elegy of "Wolf" on both record and in many of the band's live performances. This song similarly engages with the natural world as something estranged from the speaker, however it is lighter on spiritualist symbolism. Without the genre connotations and performative juxtaposition connecting the song to environmental issues it can appear as a love song, lamenting the end of a relationship. However, in the context of a heightened attention to spiritual ecological connections, the song's evocation of natural landscapes and animal metaphors feed an overarching theme of a threatened environment, and the role of artists in calling attention to the issue.

The opening of "The Lion's Roar" presents an allegorical scene of a musical performance, personifying "morning" and "night" as the actors in this scene:

> Now the pale morning sings of forgotten things
> She plays a tune for those who wish to overlook
> The fact that they've been blindly deceived
> By those who preach and pray and teach
> But she falls short and the night explodes in laughter
> (First Aid Kit 2012b).

These lines present nature as a witness to something that is being ignored, with the brightness of morning symbolizing the possibility of enlightenment to some reality about which "they" have been deceived, and the night signaling a contrasting cover of darkness over this reality. So far, the song is quite mysterious. It is unclear who the targets of allusion are. Following a shift from third person to first-person perspective, the second verse relates a warning against hubris in the face of a changing world:

> Don't you come here and say I didn't warn you
> About the way your world can alter
> And oh how you try to command it all still
> Every single time it all shifts one way or the other

These lines have strong connotations of the issue of global warming. The lines may be read as a warning directed at those who do not heed the warnings of climate scientists. The target of satire may be those in power, or indeed any people who live in disregard of the risks of climate change due to either deception, naïve optimism or willful ignorance. This implicates the song's speaker as well, who states in the first line of the chorus that "I'm a goddamn coward, but then again so are you".

By identifying with the speaker, the audience is called to admit that they too are part of the problem, but it is a call that they may ultimately ignore. Performing the song is a self-incriminating practice. To the artist, concerts entail participation in the unsustainable practices of the commercial music industry (7). However, the emphasis in the song lies on the responsibility of the addressee. Besides making accusations towards the second person "you", the chorus indicates a desire to be heard. In this endeavor, the words underscore a feeling of powerlessness:

> [T]he lion's roar, the lion's roar
> Has me seeking out and searching for you
> And I never really knew what to do.

The speaker is prompted by the crisis to act but is at a loss for ideas about how to do so. If we hear the song as a reflection on the climate movement, the "lion's roar" can be understood either as nature's warning call or as the symbolic roar of the movement. This roar is sounding, but this distress signal continues to be ignored by most people. Audiences can sing along, and yet blindly disregard the subtext of the song. Art reaching out as art is bound to be the target of misinterpretation. The speaker in the song is at a loss for ideas about how to respond to the call. Genre, however, provides rhetorical support for the direction of the song's implicit environmental criticism.

In the studio version (and presumably also in most if not all live performances), the song's narrative is framed by a musical texture in which an otherwise calm soundscape is unsettled by an ominous overtone that cannot easily be attributed to any instrument. The sound, which is synthesized via an electric keyboard, starts to build immediately when the guitar is first heard in the song's opening, and continues throughout the song. The sound is possibly an early synthetic imitation of flutes, which in European classical music from Romanticism is associated with

the pastoral, yet the synthetic quality of this sound disturbs the possibility of a pastoral vision. The reverb of other instruments can be distinguished when instruments stop playing at the end of each chorus, giving emphasis to the line "I never really knew [instruments pause] what to do [instruments resume]". The ominous overtone is continuous, only briefly relieved in the third verse, around the lyrics "the ways of the old, old winds blowing you back round". This line can be taken to include a briefly hopeful sentiment that the song's antagonists might realize their mistake and be turned around by the "old, old winds", as if a return to antecedent conditions could save human beings from themselves. Building on the genre's nostalgic hallmark, the song's old-fashioned waltz rhythm reinforces connotations of times past.

Indie folk projects nature as something that may alleviate the threat of an uncertain future, but in the context of environmental destruction must be understood as something that is itself threatened by such a future. Despite efforts to exude an air of calmness and harmony, it is at heart an anxious genre. The popularity of the genre temporally correlates with the so-called "climate anxiety" generation of Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion (Weston et al. 2021: 245). Anxiety finds expression in the elegy of nature in "Wolf" and in the almost conspiratorial blame game of "The Lion's Roar". Even though the songs do not state outright that they are about climate change or species extinction (in contrast to the explicit lyrics of Gojira), they are interpreted by their audiences as statements on the state of the environment. However, anxiety is not the end point of the affective potential of this genre. In the face of global environmental risk, anxiety may be a source not only of despair, but of solidarity and community building (Furuseth and Hennig 2023: 79; Beck 2016: 66). Both "Wolf" and "The Lion's Roar" may be understood in terms of their epideictic appeal.

Epideixis, defined by Aristotle as the branch of rhetoric concerned with assigning "praise and blame", has the rhetorical effect of engendering a sense of collectivity in audiences (Andersen & Fløttum 2022). Listeners who identify with the speaker in each song are called to relate to the plight of the natural environment. Through identification, either with nature itself or with the environmental movement, these songs may provide a collective boost to mobilize on behalf of the environment. As should be clear by now, genre does not only inhere in songs as cultural objects. Genres are patterns of social relations in which music is shared, or indeed in which an ideology or political opinion is affirmed. Genre is the way in which songs attach to and connect with an audience. It is the mechanism by which the collective is established, so that praise and blame may be imparted. In terms of the social organization of performances, indie folk is not particularly participatory, at least not any more than other genres of pop music. Performances follow a conservative artist – audience interaction: the artist produces, the audience consumes. Therefore, indie folk cannot facilitate connections as a community the way folk music does (Roy 2010). Instead, it invites a different kind of collective identification, one that may as well recognize that the connections individuals seek go beyond the social and cultural sphere, and that humanity's connection to the natural world is being threatened.

Conclusion

Genre is the social framework of the rhetorical appeal of song lyrics. Heavy metal and indie folk imbue song lyrics with a target set of community-negotiated values towards which audience interpretations of lyric meaning are guided. Music as an objectively non-denotative form of art will speak to listeners as art, leaving any potential underlying message open to misunderstanding or disregard. Yet songs are saturated with associative elements that listeners soon take for granted, affecting culture on an unconscious level. Today, music exploration is guided by algorithms which sever audiences from genre communities. This has led some to claim that genre, in the strictly prescriptive sense denoting a particular style of music within its own ecosystem of genre culture, matters less to music listeners than it used to (Petrusich 2021). Still, many artists continue to operate with stylistic preferences and ambitions. And genre will continue to guide associations of words to specific areas of signification, determining which messages will be heard, and by whom.

Generating engagement with politics through popular music requires rhetorical strategies. Pop music, however, is implicated in a non-confrontational ethos. Can political popular music be rhetorically productive? Do implications of popular music undermine artists' environmental support? Certainly, works of art should not be considered rhetorical acts in the same way as political speeches. Speech acts are political insofar as they have a political effect, or a political intention, despite lacking a clearly formulated political message. In popular music, genre provides a body of associations that may increase the appeal of political messages. Whether the words in a song are explicitly political, as in the case of Gojira, or implicitly political as in the case of First Aid Kit, they are infused with rhetorical force through the elements of genre, strengthening a song's meaning potential in a political context.

The power aesthetics of heavy metal may demand an explicit integration of environmental lyrics with the musical form, whereas indie folk is associative of environmental nostalgia even without direct lyrical reference to environmental issues. Even though the lyrical approaches in these two genres are different, that is not to say that they are equally effective. The explicitness of Gojira's lyrics allow them to be understood outside the genre community, even if some musical inflections on those meanings may be lost on audiences who are unfamiliar with the details of the genre. In this way, the genre itself may eventually penetrate the general cultural sphere with an ecological tint, the way that indie folk does. The implicitly environmental lyrics of First Aid Kit exhibit pathos in line with a sense of nature loss. As a form of environmentalist communication, however, this genre is hardly informing anyone about the issue. Its lyrics rely on their effectiveness as a form of epideictic rhetoric. They do not inform, rather they attempt to build a community around a desire to reconnect with a natural world that is being threatened.

Endnotes

(1) The concept of the political force of popular songs has been developed in relation to the philosophy of Jacques Rancière by Barry Shank (2014) and me (Bamle 2023). Force, in this meaning, refers to the possibility of making new perspectives on political realities

visible through aesthetic strategies. The purpose of the present article is not to examine specific strategies by which songs may be endowed with such force, but to examine how the context of genre impacts the possibilities of pursuing certain lyric strategies at all. In other words, this article does not discuss the implications of genre on political force, but on rhetorical force, that is, on the possibility of communicating environmentalist themes in song lyrics.

(2) The centrality of this conceptual pair in cultural discourse has been highlighted repeatedly in ecocriticism (see, for example, Buell 1995; Heise 2008; Garrard 2012; Bamle 2024).

(3) My use of the phrase "meaning potential" here is intended to be inclusive of the fact that multiple interpretations may be derived from both song lyric words and musical genre, while simultaneously recognizing that specific receptions are made more probable by specific configurations of song lyrics in the context of genre. The word "potential" is derived from similar words in German and Danish rhetorical theory, notably Karl-Otto Apel's sinnsinkarnationspotenz (Lindhardt 1989: 8) and Christian Kock's virkningspotensial (Kock 2008). These terms describe the ability of language to direct our consciousness towards specific interpretations, determining the likelihood of texts generating specific responses, whether aesthetic or political.

(4) The brightest star in our night sky, Sirius, is in fact a dual star system consisting of the main star Sirius A and a white dwarf, Sirius B. Sirius C, as mentioned in the song "To Sirius" is a fictional third star belonging to this system.

(5) In the case of First Aid Kit, there is also an implicit tradition of Swedish folk music and 1960s folk revival music asserting influence on the band's style, which, although the band prefers to highlight its North American influences, nevertheless is part of how audiences may perceive the meaning of their style.

(6) The loss of a political edge may be a plausible explanation as to what led some indie artists to approach the folk genre in the 1990s, the movement that initiated indie folk as a separate genre. In any case, indie folk seems to have continued indie rock's trajectory towards non-confrontational song lyrics.

(7) I am reminded of Timothy Morton's argument that ecological awareness in the Anthropocene takes the form of the ourobos, the self-swallowing snake, or a Möbius strip, a geometric figure twisted to have only one side, so that following the path will ultimately lead back to oneself (Morton 2016: 108-9).

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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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"Staccato signals of constant information": telegraphic analogues in 1960s/1970s popular music

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Abstract

This essay discusses examples in 1960s-1970s popular music of Philip Tagg's "telegraphic anaphone" or Morse code museme—rapid, high-pitched, monotonal chatter used in news themes—in terms of media "noise". Following McLuhan's insight that a medium's message is not content but change of scale, pace or pattern, the museme is metonymic for the transformative effects of new technologies, a metacommunicative gesture that registers the impact of a medium as "noise", the shock of modernity. It also relates to stammering, heralding but also impeding communication, generated by anxiety/urgency. It plays a mediating role in musical structures, occurring in introductions or between sections, and relates to innovative sounds/scenes—Motown, Nashville, 1960s LA, UK glam, and German electronica, connotations changing according to historical and cultural locations. An analogical emulation of electronic sounds, the museme became redundant with the rise of electronic music, although the "stutter" continues into hip-hop via scratching and sampling.

KEYWORDS: Musematic analysis, telegraph, 1960s-1970s popular music, musicology, mediation

Introduction

"You Keep Me Hangin' On" – The Supremes (1966); "Communication Breakdown" – Roy Orbison (1966); "Western Union" – The Five Americans (1967); "Wichita

Lineman" – Glen Campbell (1968); "Melting Pot" – Blue Mink (1970); "Starman" – David Bowie (1972); "Radioactivity" – Kraftwerk (1975). What all these examples have in common, apart from being popular Western pop/rock songs/recordings released in the 1960s-1970s, is a musical device, or a "museme", referred to as "anaphonic telegraphy" (Tagg and Clarida 2003: 487). The museme is "a minimal unit of musical meaning" (Tagg 2003: 84), the basis of musematic analysis, or semiotic study of popular music. This is the method of this article, analysing the above examples chronologically to show the trajectory of this motif, which declined as telegraphy became obsolete, although the medium's redundancy was also linked to its noisiness.

"Staccato signals of constant information" is how Paul Simon (1986) characterised this museme or "composite anaphone": the rapid, irregular rhythms of "news music", widely used throughout the 1970s and 1980s, in TV productions like *Sportsnight* and news and current affairs themes (Tagg and Clarida 2003). "The rhythm of this type of anaphone resembles (…) the unpredictable patterns of dots and dashes heard while sending or receiving Morse code messages, a sound associated with immediacy and urgency since the early days of telegraphy" (Tagg 2013: 512). This museme incorporates "one-pitch patterns whose internal sound events are presented in alternately rapid (dashes, for example quavers) or very rapid succession (dots, for example semiquavers)" (Tagg and Clarida 2003: 487). Generally played on electric instruments, high notes on guitar or organ, the device has technological transmission connotations.

Harmonically, the museme functions as a monophonic, inverted pedal suspended over a chord progression: the pedal remains constant while harmonies (usually) shift underneath to create tension. In terms of song structure, the device tends to feature in song introductions, and between chorus and verse, thus highlighting its mediating function. It also occasionally features in choruses, in which case it performs more of a highlighting function. Thematically, it often links to lyrics about communication: "Communication Breakdown", "Western Union" (about receiving a telegram), and "Wichita Lineman" (about working on a telephone line). "Starman" is about alien communication via radio. The thematic link in "Melting Pot" is the underlying idea of global communication through a "peace anthem". "You Keep Me Hangin' On", the first occurrence of the museme, could link to telephone communication. One could also interpret it in broader terms: Motown's "Sound of Young America", achieved through the assembly line, acceleration, democratisation of the automobile and the transistor radio. By the mid-1970s, Morse code was becoming obsolete. "Radioactivity" by Kraftwerk is discussed as signalling the end of the "telegraphic anaphone"—literalising it (the track uses Morse code), ironising and superseding it (the electronic "beeps" of code had become effectively indistinguishable from new musical instruments like synthesisers). However, the distinctive "stuttering" of the museme did echo in punk and found new expression through sampling and scratching in hip hop. Part of my argument will be to suggest that along with the broader telegraphic media technology connotations, each example is also culturally and musically distinctive, responding to a unique milieu in space and time. Each of these songs will be discussed in its own section, both in terms of the museme as a medium, as noise, but also in terms of the specific culture, time and place of origin.

Having defined the telegraphic anaphone, Tagg and Clarida problematise it as:

> [S]o stylised by the seventies that even such explicitly telegrammatic cases as (…) Campbell's "Wichita Lineman" really present a different kind of musical sign (…) because the sounds of telegraphy had long since ceased to be part of people's sonic experience (…) the etymophony of news logo rhythms may be clear but its semiotic staying power (…) has yet to be explained (2003: 488).

If telegraphy was obsolete, why did its sound continue to resonate? Telegraphy had a distinctive sonic vocabulary, unlike most forms of communication, and not only transmitted and received messages but also signalled to non-telegraphers that messages were being communicated—it can be understood as metacommunicative "framing", or communication about communication (Bateson 1956). War films exemplify this use of Morse code—audiences would not understand the message, but would get the affect of urgency. Morse code also has a normative dimension: "The credibility value of Morse code is fetishised as signifying something so thorough, so unsullied by contradictory personal experience that it invites us to trust whatever tidings it brings" (Tagg and Clarida 2003: 490). According to Marshall McLuhan, "The telegraph brought the entire world of the living to the workman's breakfast table" (1969: 15). His claim does not have to be taken literally; rather it signals the ideological power of new media technologies.

Morse code, stammering and the shock of modernity

Morse code unites manual labour, mechanism and electronics. It requires human labour to enter the dots and dashes, but is mechanical in its translation of these into electric signals and electronic in its almost instantaneous transmission of these signals. It links both to human gesture and electronic mediation. Gesturally, it resembles stammering:

> a sound associated with stress, worry and urgency because even individuals who don't normally stutter are more likely to do so if under pressure to say something important instantaneously (…) short, quick notes clearly connect with fine-motoric rather than gross-motoric movement, with fingers tapping, or teeth chattering, rather than bodies bending, arms swirling or legs kicking (Tagg 2013: 513).

Thus, it connotes nervous energy and anxiety, possibly echoing McLuhan's insight that electronic media extend the nervous system (1964). Stammering is also metacommunicative as it anticipates but also impedes the delivery of a message, like Morse code. Arguably, the stammer became metonymic for youth culture's noisy inarticulacy, as in The Who's "My Generation" (1965) (1).

The affect of the telegraph is based around a paradox: it is the "sound of modernity"—Walter Benjamin's "shock" (1968); or Attali's noise as herald—"change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society" (Attali 1985: 14). But it is also obsolescent, highlighting the "noisiness" of the medium. The obsolescence of a medium makes its mechanism manifest; its noise becomes overbearing: "'If it works, it's obsolete'. When electric speed further takes over from mechanical movie sequences, then the lines of force in structures and in media become loud and clear" (McLuhan 1964: 12). This bears out Tagg and Clarida's argument that the

medium continues to "sound" even in (or because of) its obsolescence. Highlighting mediation, far from undermining authenticity, can reinforce it—just as tape hiss can signal authenticity in genres like lo-fi.

McLuhan defines mechanism as "a model of aggregation (…) that is achieved by fragmentation of any process and by putting the fragmented parts into a series" (McLuhan 1964: 11-12). Telegraphy exemplifies mechanism: it reduces language to a series of dots and dashes, delivered in linear sequence. Morse was the first use of binary code, anticipating computers. But McLuhan argues that in modernity, mechanism has sped up discrete fragments into a continuous flow, transforming experience. Either way, we no longer hear discrete fragments of content, but instead a background hum—the sound of the medium. The telegraphic anaphone proves McLuhan's tenet, "the medium is the message" (1964) to the degree that its affect is largely independent of its content. The museme is also medium-like in its mediating role in the musical text: occurring "in the middle", associated with the refrain, or at the beginning, in which case it can be thought of as interpolating or hailing the listener.

By representing the noise of communication, these texts highlight mediation. Although noise may be an obstacle to communication, it may also give rise to aesthetic pleasure. Arguably, these issues may manifest in a musical text as tension between musical and non-musical sounds, or between flow on the one hand, and noise on the other. The mechanical or fragment reading of communication noise balances its musical potential, for example, its interpretation as a rhythm, which is the difference between time as a sequence of discrete, equivalent units and "time as a generative force of invention and differentiation" (Crocker 2013: 8). Arguably, this latter awareness of the interpenetration of past and present is necessary to hear music.

"You Keep Me Hangin' On" (1966)

No. 234 in Rolling Stone's "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time" and the Supremes' eighth US number one in late 1966, "You Keep Me Hangin' On", a lyrically urgent addressing of a relationship on tenterhooks, is often heard as paradigmatic of the Motown Sound and ethos:

> [T]he (…) Supremes hits are the purest expression of the Motown sound (…) Diana Ross meshed seamlessly with the cyclical structure Holland-Dozier-Holland favored. Her singles resembled one long composition, each new release slightly modifying an element in the overall design, perhaps adding strings or punching the tempo up a notch. By "You Keep Me Hangin' On" (1966), the approach had become so polished that Diana Ross and the Supremes began to sound like an erotic gloss on the assembly-line existence Gordy had adopted in organizing Motown—and in this respect as well, the Supremes were the ultimate embodiment of the Motown ethos (McEwen and Miller 1978: 244).

The metaphor of mechanisation accelerated to a state of flow ("an erotic gloss") could be interpreted in terms of technological transformation through innovation and medium as "message" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967). "Pop music was being

revolutionized (…) by Motown, arriving from Detroit, a place without even a hint of cultural respectability. Produced by Berry Gordy, not only a young man but a black man" (Marsh 1985: 25). Gordy drew on Taylorist assembly-line techniques of the Detroit car factories where he had worked, to make Motown a "hit factory," improving efficiency and increasing productivity by breaking down work into manageable tasks and optimising workflows, including clear demarcations between songwriters, musicians, artists and audiences. Staff songwriters Holland-Dozier-Holland "completed two or three songs a day (…) working at them bit by bit. 'We would have parts of songs, like hooks or maybe parts of a verse, so that by the end of the day we would have something accomplished'" (George 1985: 117, quote from Lamont Dozier). David Morse added that "H-D-H ruthlessly cannibalize old songs for spare parts; verbal phrases, thematic ideas, musical figures, accompaniments, even saxophone solos are shuffled together and reworked from disc to disc; every song is a collage" (quoted in George 1985: 118). Mechanisation was key—recordings, words, licks, musicians and artists were treated as parts recombined until the optimum combination was found. Every track went through a quality control process that included multiple iterations ("Hangin'" took eight sessions to complete) to produce a continuous stream of hits, "the sound of Young America" (Rolling Stone n.d).

The automobile was ideologically allied with democratisation: "the car created highways and resorts that were not only very much alike in all parts of the land, but equally available to all", reflected in the outpouring of rock and roll songs about cars (McLuhan 1964: 221). Most critically, it affected the power and mobility of youth, whom Motown addressed through the new technology of transistorised car radios, optimising their sounds for this new medium:

> In quality control's offices Motown chief engineer Mike McClain built a minuscule, tinny-sounding radio designed to approximate the sound of a car radio. The high-end bias of Motown recordings can be partially traced to the company's reliance on this piece of equipment (George 1985: 114).

Motown recordings used heavy limiting and compression to equalise and maximise volume and equalisation that accentuated the highest and lowest frequencies to overcome the background noise of car engines; Gordy also had disk-cutting equipment installed at the studio so recordings could be assessed on-site in the right format (George 1985).

Motown fused Taylorist efficiency, capitalist entrepreneurship and Black creativity through collaboration (Smith 2001). "Hangin'" exemplifies the process, its distinctive Morse code-style guitar introduction connoting urgency, excitement, but also smooth-running machinery—like a new car (Figure 1).

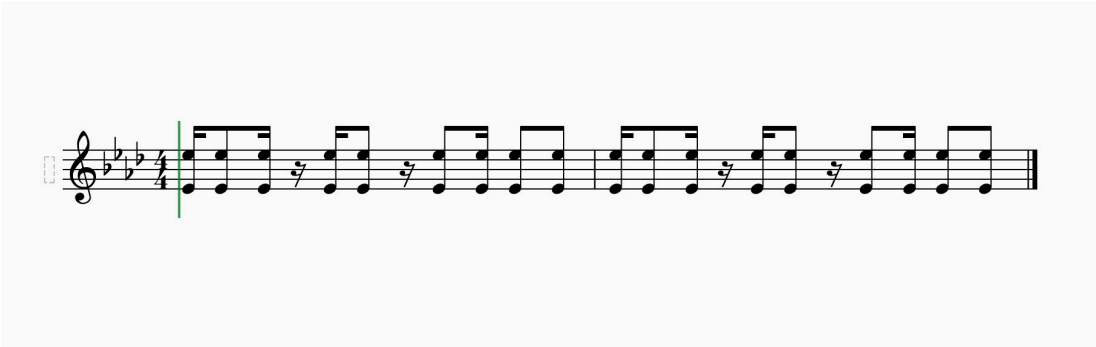

FIGURE 1. "You Keep Me Hangin' On"

Lamont Dozier dreamed up the guitar intro; top studio musician, guitarist Robert White played it; and Diana Ross, who became Motown's biggest star, sang the song. Both the galvanising guitar part and Ross's vocal shared a distinctive top-end sparkle that made Motown records stand out, while the propulsive bottom-end was supplied by bassist James Jamerson and drummer Benny Benjamin, the Funk Brothers. The assembly-line process could open Motown to accusations of Adorno-esque "standardisation", however:

> Through the mid-sixties, H-D-H's compositions and arrangements grew more ambitious (…) songs full of dramatic pauses, swelling instrumental passages, and unexpected rhythmic changes, H-D-H's "classical period". Brian Holland had been listening to a great deal of classical music, and studied the dynamics of tension and release so important to the form (George 1985: 118-9).

"Hangin'" was also musically unorthodox and innovative, with jarring harmonic shifts (from the G# major key of the intro/chorus to the tonally ambiguous verse, in B or E major, via an unexpected chromatic pivot of A major). Alongside "classical" complexity, the track also reflected rock influence, in the prominent electric guitar, a new sound for Motown. Its syncopated, percussive sound was reminiscent of Black rhythmic innovators like Bo Diddley and James Brown, and anticipated later soul/funk like "Shaft" (1971), when the guitar sound, albeit in a lower, more guttural register, and put through a wah-wah pedal, became allied to Blaxploitation narratives of urban crime. White's part, which repeats with each chorus, is an octave figure in D#, panning from left to right, underpinned with organ chords (G# D#m F# E) that increasingly clash with the riff, conveying anxiety, restlessness and alienation. Ross's spoken asides ("And there ain't nothing I can do about it!") echoed the deterministic urgency of the stuttering motif, which in turn could be heard as challenging the "Western hostility to repetition" that made traditional musicology resistant to Black music (Danielsen 2006: 154-9).

"Communication Breakdown" (1966)

This Roy Orbison single was released in November 1966 ("Hangin'" was released in October) so it seems that the telegraphic leitmotif arose here independently of Motown. It can be heard as updating the Nashville Sound of Nashville RCA Studio

B, associated with producers like Chet Atkins, and Orbison's early hits. Here, he pursues a more contemporary folk-rock direction. Unlike the Supremes song, Orbison's was not a US hit, although it was popular in Australia and New Zealand.

Despite its relative commercial failure, "Communication Breakdown" can be heard, like the Supremes track, as at once innovative, and a sophisticated commentary on technology, alienation and communication failure. The song was about how Orbison's marriage to Claudette Frady had "gone wrong", but her death in a motorbike accident earlier that year imparted an even grimmer atmosphere (Amburn 1990: 154). Orbison's songs "possess a psychological complexity that is commonly believed not to have existed in pop music until Dylan and The Beatles" (Marsh 1999: 47). Often entertaining extravagant fantasies that can suggest "psychic disturbance" (highlighted by David Lynch's use of "In Dreams" in *Blue Velvet* [1986]), Orbison's complex, dramatic songs defied songwriting convention—some, like "In Dreams", were virtually "through-composed", that is, continuously evolving, featuring little or no repetition (Lehman 2003). "Communication Breakdown" is formally complex: after a brief introduction featuring the museme, there are two verses with refrains (the verses also contain metric irregularities that support Orbison's idiosyncratic vocal phrasing); then bridge A/refrain, bridge B/refrain, refrain repeated over different chords (anticipating the coda), bridge C/refrain, coda/refrain. The point of continuity throughout is the refrain, "communication breakdown", always accompanied by the characteristic monophonic "telegraph" meme, played on an electric 12-string (Figure 2).

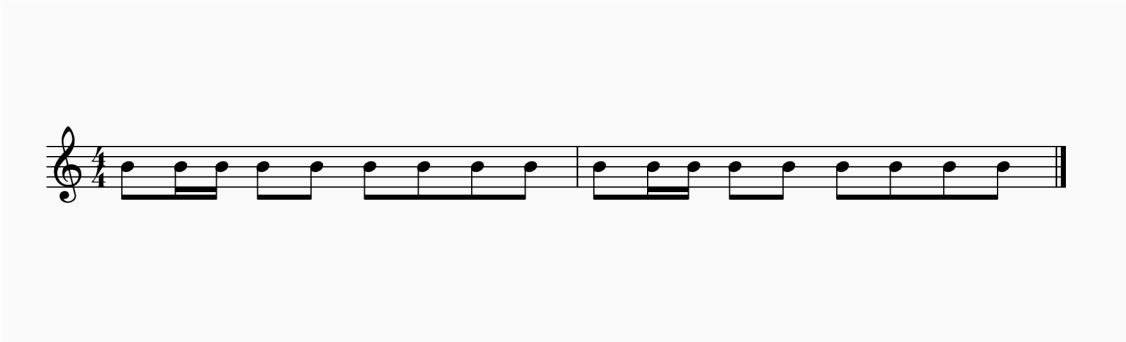

FIGURE 2. "Communication Breakdown"

Rhythmically, Orbison was influenced by the Mexican music he heard in his Texas childhood, and syncopated bolero, rumba, and flamenco rhythms are common in his work—the telegraphic motif uses an abbreviated rumba rhythm, demonstrating how the motif, as with Motown, was infused with a specific flavour, exotic and nostalgic on the one hand, but also suggesting, in this case, prickles of paranoia (Amburn 1990) (2). The electric 12-string suggests folk-rock "jangle", like the Byrds, and the recording mostly lacks the orchestration of his earlier work. Lehman (2003) compares it to Simon and Garfunkel's lyrical expressions of loneliness and alienation like "The Sound of Silence" (1965). The melancholy is reinforced by the introduction of a sustained low note, possibly strings, underneath the refrain, starting at 1'57", playing a tonic E against the sustained B in the pedal, an empty fifth sustained over the coda's double plagal cadence (A E B), producing a striking, solemn, dirge-like effect. The telegraphic motif here supports the idea of the

imminent delivery of a message of doom, albeit leavened with rhythmic life and harmonic complexity.

"Western Union" (1967)

The Five Americans were a Texan garage band who appeared on Lenny Kaye's 1972 *Nuggets* compilation (although not this song, their only hit, reaching number 5 in the US in early 1967). The garage rock of *Nuggets* combined second-hand R&B influences (via British Invasion groups like the Rolling Stones) with early psychedelia, to produce a sound which led to "punk rock", a narrative coined by early 1970s writers at *Creem* to reclaim authentic rock and roll from the hippie counterculture. Compositionally, "Western Union" was a letter song, a well-established genre in pop music, with a couple of technological twists—the group's signature sound was a Vox Continental organ, which helps supply the characteristic pedal, along with electric guitar and an insistent "tuh tutuh tutuh" vocal refrain. "Mike Rabon, our lead guitar player, was just fooling around with his guitar when he came up with a unique sound," member Norman Mezell said. "It sort of reminded us of a telegraph key. That's when we decided to write 'Western Union'" (Pore-Lee-Dunn Productions n.d.). Once again, the telegraphic motif is associated with innovation, if not gimmickry. The song title refers to the US telecommunications company—the follow-up single was entitled "Zip Code".

A notable feature of the track is its monotonality—the majority of the song uses just two chords—D major and Dsus4. This makes it extremely drone-y, especially when combined with the pedal, which emphasises A, a fifth relation, like the preceding examples (Figure 3). The drone in turn suggests psychedelia, which often manifested as fascination with sustained tones, extracting maximum interest out of minimal stimuli. The psychedelic drone had a double valence—primitivist, archaic and exotic—"the drone as synecdoche for archaic folksiness and peasant simplicity which harmonic practices among the aristocracy and merchant classes had supposedly superseded" (Tagg 2001: 84). The drone can also be technological, producing the "unified awareness" that McLuhan saw as arising from electronic media (1964: 249). At the same time, it can represent grinding urban monotony just as much as hallucinogenic bliss, because the other aspect of Nuggets was its influence on punk (Bannister 2006). A proto-punk track like "I Wanna Be Your Dog" by The Stooges (1969) featured producer John Cale's piano stabbing a single note throughout, echoing his Velvet Underground work and the influence of New York minimalist composers like La Monte Young.

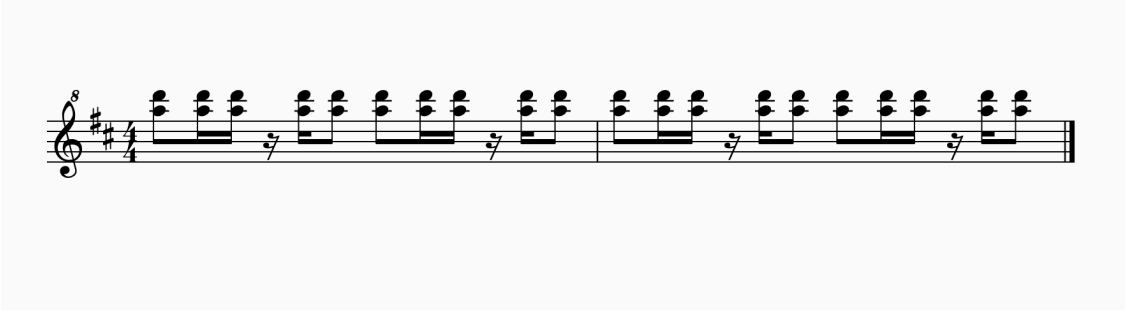

FIGURE 3. "Western Union"

Unlike psychedelia, the Velvet Underground used extreme volume to achieve "ego death", imagined in much less benign terms than the counterculture, achieved not through psychedelics but through speed and heroin. So, in addition to its telegraphic connotations, the museme here connects to avant-garde minimalism, repetition, and their connections to altered states, whether heaven-sent or hell-bent.

The "stammering" effect typical of the telegraphic motif is literalised in "Western Union" as the pedal is echoed in the vocals, which repeat the morse motif at the end of the chorus and in a call/response with the lead vocal in the verse. The lyric is a "dear John" tale of rejection, so it is possible to read the stammer as produced by anger, grief or frustration (although the singer also announces he has found a new love later in the song).

A final twist to the monotonal nature of "Western Union" is its possible relation to the flatness of the US Midwest (also a theme in "Communication Breakdown" and "Wichita Lineman"). Tagg notes how it is "no surprise to find plains and other large, empty, motionless spaces manifested in terms of static harmony (…) and how it can in euroclassical contexts also be understood in terms of a drone" (Tagg 2001: 83-4). The image of telephone poles stretching into the distance is paradigmatic in this regard, producing a mythical America of endless possibility (a later example being Tom Petty's "American Girl" (1977), which mythopoetically combines psychedelic jangle with punk drone).

"Wichita Lineman" (1968)

The song, a no. 3 US hit, was commissioned by Glen Campbell as a follow-up to "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" (also set in the US Midwest and written by Jimmy Webb). Campbell had started in LA as a session guitarist, one of the Wrecking Crew, so again part of a distinctive "sound"—1960s West Coast pop—that was rapidly becoming dominant in commercial music (3). Campbell could also sing and was becoming a star in the country/adult contemporary pop market. Now he was looking for another hit, and Webb recalls that Campbell kept phoning him while he was writing the song, to check its progress: in this sense, the "lineman was still on the line".

Webb, who had grown up in the Midwest, recalled seeing linemen working: "An image occurred to [Webb] of a long, flat Kansas country road, with telegraph poles careering away from him in the distance, shimmering in the summer sun. No contrast, just horizon (…) a long line of telegraph poles disappearing into the distance and a lonely figure suspended against the endless sky (…) A featureless world, like being on Mars" (Jones 2019: 92, 97). It added up to a portrait of a lonely man—the first "existential country song" (Jones 2019).

Once again, the example strains at the limits of genre, fusing country, baroque pop and easy-listening. Harmonically, the song is complex, starting in F major but changing key mid-verse to D major (approximately at the word "overload"). It has been suggested that the F major section deals with the lineman's immediate situation, while the latter section, which includes the refrain, alludes to his unrequited romantic feelings, "and I need you more than want you / And I want you for all time" (Rooksby 2001). The telegraphic motif (Figure 4) seems to reinforce the latter, as it comes in at the end of the refrain and (as in many of the succeeding

examples), mediates between the refrain and the next verse. Rooksby suggests that this section, repeated in the coda, features a "Bb-C change, harmonically either IV-V in F major or bVI-bVII in D major, never resolving — as we leave the lineman suspended between two lives, just as he is suspended between the earth and sky" (2001: 54).

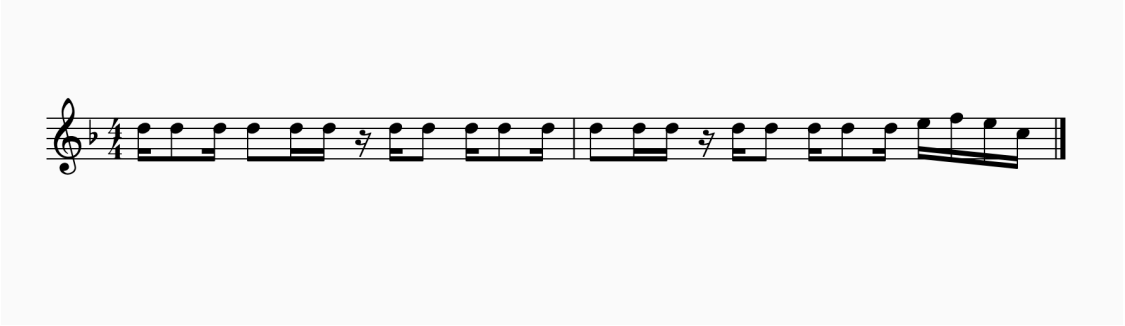

FIGURE 4. "Wichita Lineman"

Thus, the whole "telegraphic" section has an unearthly quality, emphasised with high strings (arranged by Al De Lory). The Morse code part was added with Webb's "Gulbransen electronic organ (…) Its unique 'bubbling' sound echoed what he imagined to be the noise the signals made as they passed though the (…) wires" (Jones 2019: 109).

> Glen said, "Here at the end I want it sound like (…) 'Telstar'" (…) I just held these two notes down, and the organ takes these two notes, either a fourth or a fifth, and it cycles them up and down the keyboard (…) a very shivery, icy, almost like outer space kind of sound. It sounded very technological (…) Glen went crazy and said, "We have to get that, we gotta put that on the fade" (…) I played open fourths and fifths up and down the keyboard with only two fingers (…) a fascinating tintinnabulation a little like the Northern lights" (Webb, quoted in Jones 2019: 110).

Once again, technological novelty is at the forefront of the Morse sound. Interestingly, both Campbell and Webb heard it as "eerie" and "alien", connotations developed later in texts like "Starman", where the message emanates from a "beeping satellite" (Tagg and Clarida 2003: 490). But the motif also suggests Midwest spaces and skies—along with the tinkling sounds of messages on the wire, all emphasising the narrator's isolation. So, the meaning of the motif changes—still about the sound of communication, but overlaid with rural isolation and existential emptiness.

"Melting Pot" (1970)

The late 1960s and early 1970s pop charts featured several "global anthems"—influenced by hippie utopianism, allied to McLuhan's interconnected "global village". Beginning with the Beatles' 1967 broadcast of "All You Need Is Love" on *Our World* (the first live, multinational, multi-satellite television production), a

range of paeans to universal "brotherhood" appeared: the Fifth Dimension's "Age of Aquarius" and Sly and the Family Stone's "Everyday People" (both 1969); quasi-religious appeals like "Oh Happy Day" by the Edwin Hawkins Singers (1969), "My Sweet Lord" (George Harrison 1970), "Joy To The World" (Three Dog Night) and "Imagine" (John Lennon)—both 1971. Advertisers also latched on to the trend: Coca-Cola's "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing" (1971) became a hit for the UK's New Seekers. The term "melting pot" acquired its meaning of ethnic assimilation and elimination of cultural difference via Israel Zingwill's eponymous 1908 play, which locates the US as the melting pot of a new global society.

"Melting Pot" was written by Roger Cook and Peter Greenaway (who also wrote "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing"). Once again, there was a "sound" in the background, as the multi-racial group Blue Mink was largely made up of UK session musicians, such as Herbie Flowers (bass) and Madeline Bell (vocals) who performed on many hits of the period, often written by Cook/Greenaway. It became the group's debut single and the first 1970s number one in the UK. Although not a US hit (ironically), it fitted the global unity/peace anthem genre, with its ethnically diverse cast, rousing chorus, and lyrics about "a get-along scene (…) a beautiful dream", although some of its language, while intended as a send-up of racial stereotypes, would later be condemned (RadioToday 2019).

As a "singalong", the track is harmonically straightforward, based around a repeated I IV V (F Bb C) chord sequence common in 1960s pop, which Tagg (2001: 442) terms the "La Bamba loop", after Richie Valens' 1958 hit. The morse code motif, an octave figure in unison on piano and electric guitar, repeats an F over a descending chord sequence (F Eb Db C) at the end of the chorus, forming a bridging section between chorus and verse—giving the impression that the chorus is being relayed around the world by electronic media, a connotation reinforced by the underlying harmony's temporary departure from diatonicism (Figure 5). Media's connecting quality is symbolised in the bridging sound of the motif: structurally it performs a similar mediating role in "Wichita Lineman" and David Bowie's "Starman" (4).

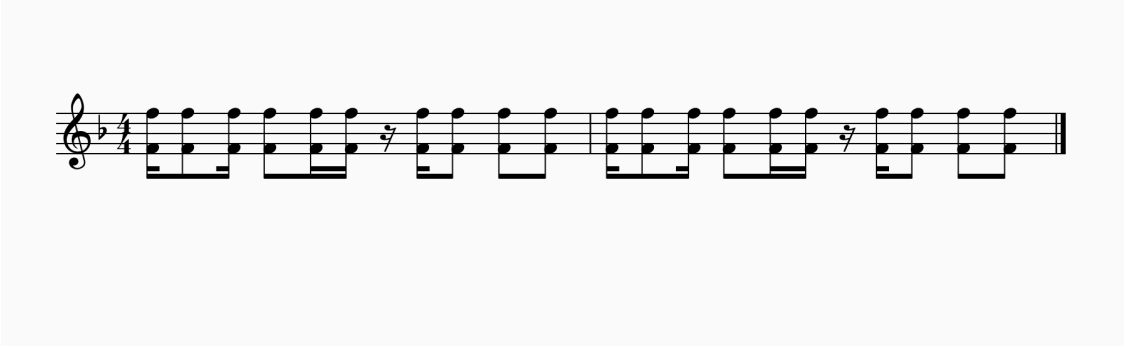

FIGURE 5. "Melting Pot"

"Starman" (1972)

Connected to 1960s McLuhanite "globalism", US technological utopianism promised to expand human presence into space. Narratives of alien contact had underlined the power of electronic media—Orson Welles' 1938 broadcast *The War*

of the Worlds demonstrated how easily radio audiences, already edgy with the sound of Morse code, could be misled. But influential texts like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) suggested alternatives to Cold War paranoia. David Bowie had already imagined himself as an astronaut in 1969's "Space Oddity" (used by the BBC in coverage of the Apollo 11 moon landing in July that year). He continued to address galactic themes in "Life on Mars" (1971) and "Oh You Pretty Things" (1971), adopting the persona of Messianic spaceman Ziggy Stardust on the eponymous 1972 album, for which "Starman" was the first single. Aptly, "Starman" deals with an alien who becomes a pop star, through the radio: "He was into Marshall McLuhan—he just thought the medium was the message, there's nothing deeper, that's it" (Battista 2022). Like Andy Warhol, Bowie thought that media impact was everything; content was overrated. These ideas also related to glam rock, the genre with which Bowie was now associating—its emphasis on glitter and fun could be read as the visual equivalent of telegraphic chatter.

A media magpie, Bowie plundered culture, constructing stardom through polysemic style and calculated outrage, creating a patchwork of allusions for fans to pick over. The introduction of "Starman", similar to "Space Oddity" (loosely strummed major 7ths on a 12-string acoustic), positions it as a sequel in the space race story. The narrator is listening to his radio when it fades and "Came back like a slow voice on a wave of pha-a-ase / That weren't no DJ, that was hazy cosmic jive"; signal noise blurring into the message. The music then pauses for the entry of the Morse motif, A notes, on a phased electric guitar, over descending chords A and G, very similar to "Melting Pot" (the difference being that the order is reversed so that the telegraphic motif precedes the chorus) (Figure 6). As in "Melting Pot", the sound implies broadcast, a hero's fanfare: "There's a starman waiting in the sky," also suggesting the sound of a "beeping satellite", an idea Bowie could have got from Pink Floyd's "Astronomy Domine" (1967). The chorus, like "Melting Pot", is a "singalong", using a common progression of diatonic chords in F major (F Dm Am C or I vi iii V), while the verse is centred around Gm, which, if regarded as ii of F major, introduces a feeling of expectation borne out by the chorus.

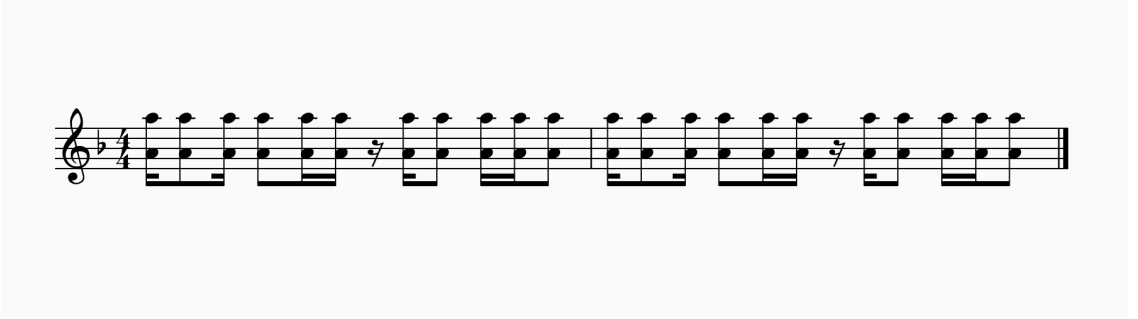

FIGURE 6. "Starman"

Bowie sings an octave jump on the chorus hook, a gesture of elevation; Campbell uses a similar vocal jump on the refrain, "still on the line". In Bowie's case it also alludes to Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow", from another text about being saved by fantastic beings (*The Wizard of Oz*). Garland was also a camp icon, thereby tying Ziggy's alien-ness to his sexual identity, opening up a space of queer-ness:

"He'd like to come and meet us, but he thinks he'll blow our minds". But for all that, the chorus ends with an invocation to "boogie" familiar to most rock fans, pastiching glam rock compatriot Marc Bolan.

"Radioactivity" (1975)

If "Starman"associated telegraphy with the related (and more relevant) medium of radio, the title track of Kraftwerk's 1975 album, their first fully electronic effort, extends this association, revealing while also questioning its power. The telegraphic museme comes full circle—whereas in earlier examples, the museme was created analogically, by musical instruments, here the electronic sounds of the museme are of the same order as the sounds used by the group. Secondly, the track uses actual Morse code (to spell out the song title). Accordingly, it is not possible to notate what is essentially more like a "found" sound.

With Kraftwerk, the medium becomes the message literally, as the band see themselves as working primarily with radio waves, developing the "radio" connotation that began with Bowie. However, Kraftwerk are less interested in listening to and more interested in being a radio station: "We saw ourselves, Kraftwerk, in the Kling Klang studio, to be a kind of radio station of our own" (Ralf Hütter, quoted in Schütte 2020: 41-42).

Whereas in the earlier examples, the Morse code museme is like a news flash from another time or place, highlighting mediation, here it appears as apparently a normal part of the electronic world (although this world is strange). Electronic sound was, for Kraftwerk, part of everyday life, just as it was a normal part of their music. Like Andy Warhol, they wanted to transform the mundane experience of modernity into art, neither new nor old, but current (Pattie 2010).

There are a number of differences between Kraftwerk's "Radioactivity" (1975) and the earlier examples, marking the end of the "telegraphic anaphone". This track uses Morse Code in a more literal fashion than the earlier examples, which were analogically emulating Morse, making it primarily signify as music, whereas here the sound is more like "found sound". At the same time that the use is more literal, it is also more ironic—for example, the track segues from the album's opening track, "Geiger Counter", in which the electronic "beeps" measure radiation, implying that the code, the radio signal, is potentially lethal. This reading also links to the cover art, which shows a radio set manufactured during the Nazi era, suggesting the sinister power of radio as a propaganda tool (the sets only received shortwave so they could not pick up foreign broadcasts). The overall sense is that the telegraphic anaphone has been superseded.

Conclusion

This essay has applied Tagg and Clarida's discussion of the "telegraphic anaphone" museme to the use of this museme in 1960s-1970s popular music in the US, UK and Germany. It argues that it is used primarily to represent the "sound of the medium", the "noise" associated with media transmission, and the "shock" associated with new media, emphasising the impact of the medium, rather than its

content. From earliest instances (Motown, Roy Orbison), it was also associated with specific regional sounds (Detroit, Nashville) while also expanding to suggest the US Midwest, and becoming associated with punk minimalism and psychedelia through its "drone qualities". In its final phase, the sound migrates to the UK and Europe, tending to highlight the "radio" connotations of the "pop anthem", invoking McLuhan's global village, or Bowie's glam singalongs.

New music technologies rendered the telegraphic anaphone obsolete. However, the minimalistic aspects of the museme—its tendency to repeat a single tone, and its meta-communicative aspects (its stutter) were aspects taken up in punk. The Clash used a single-note staccato guitar on "Tommy Gun" (1978) (with the obvious imitative connotation) and actual Morse code at the end of "London Calling" (1979). Given the demagogic aspects of the group, the invocation of motifs of "urgency" seemed apt, although also anachronistic—"London Calling" referred back to the BBC's WW2 call sign, suggesting nostalgia for militarism. However, the mutual endorsement of the group and Grandmaster Flash (Afrika Bambaataa) facilitated cross-cultural communication and hip-hop collaboration with other new music (Toltz 2010). Thus, Kraftwerk influenced early hip-hop, and the new technologies of turntabling, sampling, and scratching re-introduced the "stutter" by literally cutting up and repeating content. Now the stutter could involve the entire track, which could be paused, repeated, scratched—a much more radical intervention, although arguably one that continued a key theme of youth culture as "noise", a disruption of "flow", a metacommunicative gesture that emphasised breaks in transmission and made them part of a new, albeit fractured whole. If Morse code had represented digital code as a mechanism, the speeding up of that process via computers made the mechanism into a new medium, much as the telegraphic museme had represented the acceleration of mechanical sequence into electric flow.

Endnotes

(1) Perhaps the first artist to highlight vocal and electronic stuttering was The Who. Notoriously on "My Generation" (1965), vocal stuttering highlighted subcultural "noise" (Hebdige 1979), and inarticulacy, as in debut single, "I Can't Explain" (1965). The stuttering was amplified via Townshend's manipulation of his guitar pickup switch to produce Morse code-like signals amid the aural chaos of feedback and distortion of "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" (1965).

(2) The hammer-like bolero rhythm of "Running Scared" (1961) had overtones of the firing squad, as Orbison contemplated romantic doom.

(3) Sagittarius's "Get the Message" (1968) was another track recorded by Los Angeles' session musicians, possibly including Glen Campbell (Sagittarius was well-known musician/producer Gary Usher). The track featured the characteristic Morse effect on the chorus.

(4) It was also a big hit in New Zealand, reaching no. 2 in 1970 and no. 1 in a remake by When The Cat's Away in 1988.

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Insiders' Perspectives on Democratisation of Classical Music Production

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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.

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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.

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Considering Golden Section Proportionality in Popular Music: Six Pieces by Jacob Collier

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Abstract

The Golden Section, sometimes referred to as the "golden ratio" or "golden mean", has been referenced in many studies in the arts, serving as a mathematically-based aesthetic criterion for form, structure, proportionality, and balance. In the domain of musical composition, scholars have noted the relationship between the golden section and musical structure; I will briefly illustrate how these studies have focused on proportions and structures in classical music only, which has used a methodology of counting bar numbers in a musical score. I follow this by demonstrating that golden section proportionality may not only be confined to classical music but can also be applied to popular music. I introduce an analytical method that measures the elapsed or clock time of the sounding music rather than examining a musical score. In doing so I use the concept of a temporal "key event point", illustrating this in six works by Jacob Collier.

KEYWORDS: Golden section, Jacob Collier, musical proportion, time-based analysis, music composition

Introduction

It perhaps goes without saying that the field of scholarship in popular music studies has been significantly expanding since from around the time that Wilfrid Mellers authored the *Twilight of the Gods*, his innovative and perhaps idiosyncratic

perspective on the music of the Beatles (Mellers 1973). This growth – accompanied by a proliferation of pop music genres and styles – has incorporated a diverse range of approaches and perspectives in musical understanding and analysis, encompassing cultural theory, ethnography, feminist musicology, semiotics, narrative analysis, as just a few examples. A useful guide through this complex and multi-layered field has been offered by Zagorski-Thomas who notes – in the context of recorded popular music – that "musicology in general, tends to divide into two camps that we might broadly describe as production and reception-based approaches. On one side academics study the technical and creative process that shapes the musical output and on the other they study the way in which audiences (real or idealised) engage with the 'text' to create meaning" (Zagorski-Thomas 2014: 135). It is in the former "camp" that this article sits, aligning with texts such as those by Covach (2005), Middleton (1990), Moore (2003, 2012) Scotto, Smith and Brackett (2019), Spicer and Covach (2010), and Tagg (2009), which are built on formal analytical frameworks originally deriving from studies in classical and contemporary music idioms (discussed at length by Middleton 1990: 103-126). In many ways these texts reflect Middleton's comment on Mellers study of the Beatles in terms of the mode in which they "privilege the parameters of tonality, melodic contour, and, especially, harmony" (Middleton 1990: 113).

However, in this analytical privileging of particular musical parameters, one that receives the least consideration could be said to be the parameter of time; time not in the sense of what one might identify as its "sub-components" – rhythm, duration, tempo, pulse – but time as the space in which the phenomenon of music occurs. Jonathan Kramer describes it thus, "Music unfolds in time. Time unfolds in music" (Kramer 1998: 1) and he quotes Suzanne Langer's well-known phrase that music "makes time audible" (Langer 1953: 110). Kramer makes the point that, "Many scholars agree that time is both the essential component of musical meaning and the vehicle by which music makes its deepest contact with the human spirit. Yet most theorists do not treat time as central to their understanding of music", and suggests that "the majority of theoretical works on musical time deal with rhythm and meter and how they are perceived" (Kramer 1998: 72). Two analytical approaches might be articulated here: firstly, musical time as objective, quantifiable and measurable – generally understood as "clock time", or secondly, music as experienced, understood creating its own temporal reality – sometimes known as ontological time (Kramer 1988: 288). It is the first aspect of time that this paper is concerned with, and from the perspective of the writer/composer, rather than the listener, together with how musical time relates to musical proportion.

Of course, how musical time is articulated or embodied in a piece of music corresponds with the structuring of sections, phrases and other building blocks into formal structures – we see this in classical music forms such as sonata-form, or in popular music such as in verse-chorus form. Form, however, in most studies tends to be treated categorically rather than proportionally; for example, as seen in the area of Covach's extensive codification of rock music structures (Covach 2005), or Everett's analysis of phrase structures and voice leading (Everett 2000). Within this codification there have been scholars who have noted how musical expressivity can be enhanced with the disruption of predictable periodicity or temporal grouping into four-, eight- and sixteen bars: this might occur through unexpected harmonic twists, extended or delayed cadences, a truncated bridge for example

(this can be seen in Holm-Hudson's study of the music of Genesis (Holm-Hudson 2010) and Spicer's essay on "Regatta de Blanc" by The Police (Spicer 2010). Nonetheless, in these academic studies bar-based symmetry and clock-time proportion is not commonly foregrounded, and even here musical proportion is typically discussed descriptively rather than measured systematically as a ratio of total duration.

Proportion and the Golden Section

The Golden Section (sometimes known as the Golden Ratio or Golden Mean and hereafter referred to as the GS), is a geometric/arithmetical concept which can be traced back to the writings of Euclid in the fourth century BC. It describes the division of a single line into two parts, where the ratio of the smaller segment [B] to the larger segment [C] is equivalent to the ratio of the larger segment [A] to the entire line. Mathematically, when considering the whole length as a single unit, the larger segment represents approximately 0.618 of the total length, while the smaller segment accounts for about 0.382, with the two segments together constituting one whole. When expressed as a percentage, the GS occurs at roughly 61.8% of the total length of the line (Figure 1).

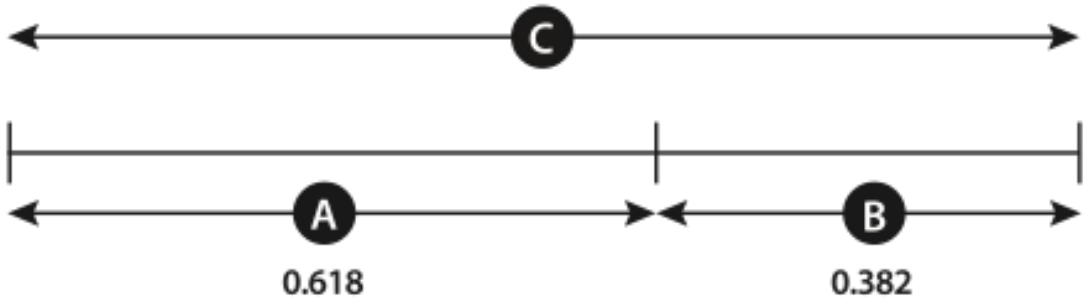


FIGURE 1. Mathematical proportions of the Golden Section

Based on irrational numbers, the GS has been suggested to be a mathematical principle that not only reflects universal laws – such as the structure of DNA, the growth patterns of plants, the shapes of seashells, and the spiral formations of galaxies (for example, Chen et al. 2011; Green 1995; Luttge and Souza 2019; Oldershaw 1982; Zeng and Wang, 2009) – but is also said to be embedded in the products of human creativity. Consequently, it has become associated (although sometimes contested) with concepts of aesthetics: a substantial body of both scholarly and popular literature has explored the role of the GS in the fine and visual arts with many highlighting its evidence in the works of figures such as Leonardo da Vinci (Murtinho 2015), Piet Mondrian (Konečni 2003), Le Corbusier (Arnheim 1966), Hokusai (Evans 2005), with other GS visual arts-related studies (for example, Boseli 1984; Erikson 1986; McWhinnie 1987). An understanding and analysis of the GS in these and other studies has been based on a straightforward methodology which – reflecting the geometric origins of the proportion – involves

the measuring of lengths and proportions within the various visual artistic products. For instance, this might be through calculating the proportions that define the horizon in a landscape, or determining the numerical relationship of different components of a classical group portrait, or within the field of architecture, such as identifying the dimensions of structural elements making up a gothic cathedral or other constructions (Arnheim 1966; Frings 2002). More recently, the visual proportions of the GS have been identified in areas such as computer-aided graphic design (Ying, and Sun Yue 2022), product design (Elam 2001; Gielo-Perczak 2001), packaging design (Raghubir & Greenleaf 2006), as well as car design (Koh 2015) (1).

The Golden Section and Music

In the field of music, and specifically musical composition, there is a not insignificant body of scholarship concerning notions of musical proportion and how it corresponds with the GS. So, prior to considering the golden section in popular music, I aim to offer an overview of these studies, most of which sit in the domain of what we understand as classical music. These musicological studies have their origins in the nineteenth century, most notably in the works of Zeising (1854/2014), who posited that universal laws of beauty – embodied in the golden section – could be identified in both nature and art (Zeising 1855). But, as pointed out by Michelle Phillips (2019), substantial scholarly inquiry into the intersection of music with the golden section only gained real momentum in the latter half of the twentieth century. This was exemplified by extensive studies undertaken by scholars such as Ernest Lendvai and Roy Howat who each authored in-depth monographs of the compositions of Béla Bartók (Lendvai 1966) and Claude Debussy (Howat 1993), although the study of the GS in music actually spans a far wider range of composers over a period of seven centuries. For instance, musicologists have observed the GS in the works of notable composers from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such as Guillaume de Machaut (Powell 1979), John Dunstable (Trowell 1979), and Guillaume Dufay (Sandresky 1981), through Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Perry Camp 1968), to more recently with composers such as Erik Satie (Adams 1996), Dmitri Shostakovich (Rofe 2016), Karlheinz Stockhausen (Maconie 2005) and György Ligeti (Luchese 2001).

It is important to note that the method of identifying GS proportionality in the visual arts has been – perhaps unwittingly – directly transposed to all these musical studies with the analytical strategies focussed on the music's "linearity" or, the "horizontal" dimension of music articulated through the temporal and structural evolution of musical lines or sound sequences and manifested as a musical score. This method has been implemented via a methodology of counting barlines and/or individual notes or phrases or sequences within a composer's musical score and then identifying any correlation with the GS. That correlation may occur through musical "markers": throughout much of Western music, the structure, form, or shape of a piece of music is frequently signposted by particular, identifiable and sometimes sudden or immediate, changes that guide listeners through the unfolding musical "territory" or landscape, and it is these that scholars in their studies of musical proportions have employed to identify GS proportions. The musical

markers may be contextualised through the parameters of dynamics, pitch, harmony, tempo, instrumentation or texture and timbre. However, some methodological problems arise; firstly, can simply measuring distances in a piece of visual art such as a painting be simply transposed onto to the study of an art form which relies upon time for its realisation? Howat in his major study of proportions in the music of Debussy, grappled with what analysts should be measuring: bar lines (notation) or the music's temporal durations: "Should temporal proportions in music be measured by clock time or by the music's notated pulse?" (Howat 1983: 15). Secondly, in many of the studies of GS proportionality in classical music, there is the added issue of changes of tempo which may occur within a piece. In his golden section analyses of works by Shostakovich, Rofe underscores this issue of counting barlines stating that, "As there are numerous changes in tempo, bar counting becomes invalid, as the way the music is experienced in time will be conditioned by those changes" (Rofe 2008: 28).

The golden section and popular music: towards an appropriate methodology

As is clear from the above account of the occurrence of the GS in music, all such musicological studies relate to Western classical music; indeed, there is very little to be found in the literature with respect to any music which sits outside this genre and virtually none with respect to popular music. Crucially, all these studies are based on the of counting of barlines in a musical score. However, this ignores the fact that popular music is primarily stored and transmitted in recorded format rather than as a written score; as Tagg points out, "(…) while notation may be a viable starting point for much art music analysis, in that it was the only form of storage of over a millennium, popular music, not least in its Afro-American guises, it is neither conceived nor designed to be stored or distributed as notation (…)" (Tagg 2000: 75). In its recorded form then, popular music is "stored" within the constraints of clock time, within the frame of minutes and seconds and to this author's knowledge, apart from the study by Collins and Dunn (2021) there are no others which aim to understand musical proportion(s) as a measurable distribution of clock time across, for example, a song or instrumental track. Studies such as Covach's *Form in Rock Music* (2005) and Everett's *Expression in Pop-Rock Music* (2000), while exploring common formal designs and phrase structures in rock, only translate periodic organisation and symmetries (using recorded clock timing) at a categorical level, rather than in terms of proportions across a whole piece.

Therefore, I am proposing an alternative methodological approach to exploring golden section proportionality in popular music based on the work of Collins and Dunn (2021) who study GS proportions in measured time across the whole output of the European EDM band, Djihan and Kamien; that is, through a methodology of measuring chronological time – or clock or elapsed time – rather than through the analysis of a musical score.

Jacob Collier

Stumbling one day across the quite remarkable arrangement of Henry Mancini's "Moon River" by Jacob Collier – an artist of whom I previously knew very little – led me over a period of time to explore his other musical output. Collier is an English singer-songwriter who is also a multi-instrumentalist, performer, producer, and prolific contributor to online discussions of his harmonic vocabulary (such as microtonality, shifts between equal or just temperament, chord clusters, unusual modulation shifts) as well as regularly delivering workshops at MIT and elsewhere. He is also the composer, performer and producer of some fifty tracks on a four-volume album, *Djesse Vol. 1–4* (2018-2024). On these albums, which cross popular music, jazz, rock, choral, digital, and gospel music among other idioms, Collier performs with an extremely wide range of artists as well as with choirs and orchestras, collaborating also with audio-media technologists to help realise his musical intentions. Each album has secured him a Grammy Award, on top of two Grammys for songs on his debut 2016 album *In My Room*, an album composed, performed and produced by Collier in the back room of his home in London. Most recently the seventh Grammy was awarded for his arrangement of Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" (2024).

Delving into Collier's sound world it became increasingly clear that some of his approaches to traditional and non-traditional musical forms and harmonic language corresponded with the proportional attributes of the Golden Section. To my knowledge there are no published analyses of his music: here I aim to introduce a case study analysis of three of his original compositions and three of his arrangements of mainstream songs which I suggest align with golden section temporal proportionality.

Six pieces by Jacob Collier

From the range of around sixty-four tracks by Collier, which cross five albums, these six pieces represent a very broad range of styles, from a straightforward popular song ("Little Blue") to an *a capella* choral work ("Home Is"), a jazz-oriented work ("Don't You Know") to three extended arrangements of popular classics ("All Night Long", "Moon River" and "Bridge Over Troubled Water").

The analysis is supported with extracts from Jacob Collier's own discussions of his songs on YouTube. In the analyses following, the total duration of a track is measured in seconds, and then multiplied by the golden section constant (0.618) to determine where the "positive" (2) GS point would lie. In other words, for a hypothetical five-minute piece, calculating the GS point would be through converting the five minutes into seconds (=300) then using the GS multiplier of 0.618; thus, the CGS would occur at 185.4 seconds into the piece. Since Collier's mode of music creation is primarily through digital audio workstation (DAW) software tools such as Logic, which rely upon graphical rather than conventional music notation, the scored examples of his music in this paper are transcriptions with corresponding bar numberings used for illustrative/referencing purposes only, avoiding the inclusion of a screenshot of the DAW's arrange window (Collier's

preferred compositional environment) from a composition such as "Moon River" which has over 100 MIDI and audio tracks.

Little Blue

"Little Blue" is included on Collier's album *Djesse Vol. 4*, released on 29 February 2024, featuring the vocals of Brandi Carlile, and the Aeolians choir with all instruments (acoustic guitar, bass, balalaika, keyboards, percussion) played by Collier. This relatively formally straightforward song, in comparison with the harmonic complexity of some of Collier's other works, remains in a consistent overall key and a consistent tempo throughout. In comparison with the dramatic key event point in "Moon River" which I describe later, with its sudden shifts of tonality, and a transition to just intonation from equal temperament, the key event point in this particular song is much more subdued.

The song is 4′25″ long and so the calculated or mathematical golden section (hereafter referred to as CGS) lies at 2′43″. What happens very close to this point is that the acoustic guitar, balalaika, electric bass, pedal bass, choir, and shaker – which have been playing consistently up to here – all drop out and Collier quietly introduces a sample of his "audience choir" at 2′39″. This is a significant moment for Collier since the audience choir is now an established part of virtually every Collier live concert, where he leads the audience in singing single sustained tones in simple two- or three-part harmonies. Drawn from live international performances, Collier introduces a combination of audience recordings for this particular piece from three concerts: Vienna, 4 November 2022, Sydney, 8 December 2022, and Brisbane, 10 December 2022. The significance of this moment in "Little Blue" is emphasised by Collier in his YouTube commentary: "I combined these three audience choirs, chopped them up, put them into Logic…I added some reverb, and these three choirs become the underpinning voices behind my new song Little Blue" (Collier 2023). These audience voices, which enter at 2′39″, continue swelling in and out until the end of the song; in terms of GS proportions as measured in clock time, this key expressive moment where Collier "underpins" his track, can be seen to constitute just a brief four second deviation from the CGS point or minus 1.88% deviation across the whole song (Figure 2).

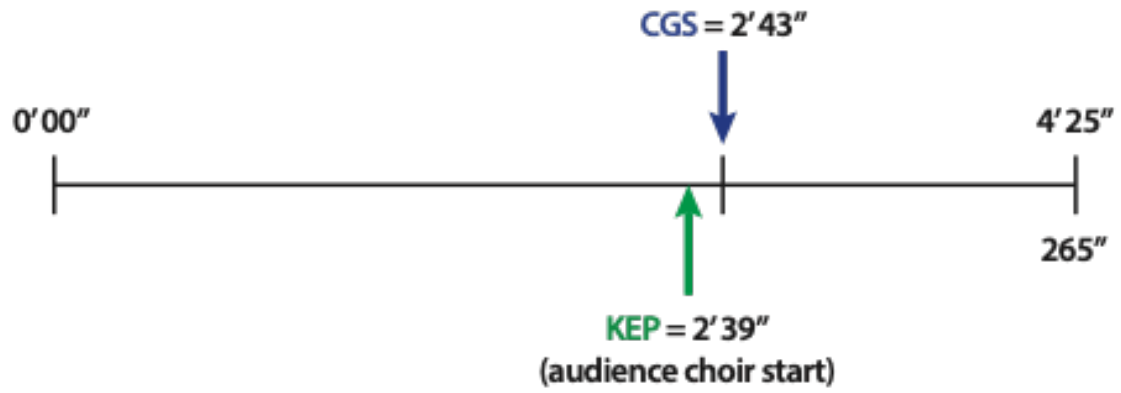
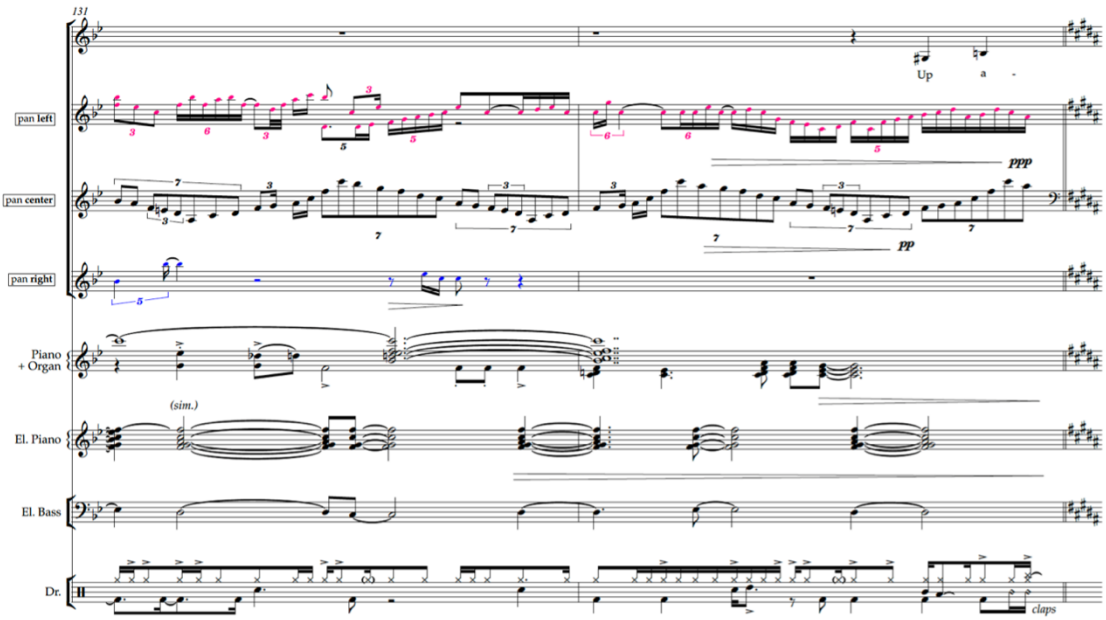


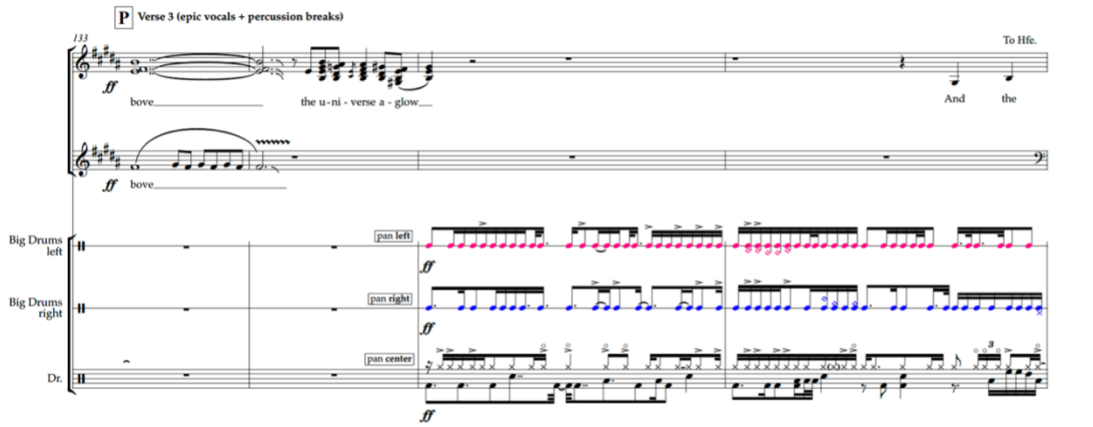
FIGURE 2. The key event point of "Little Blue" at the start of the audience choir.

Don't You Know

The methodology of identifying GS points in clock time rather than through the conventional mode of counting bars, can be realised in quite a different genre: "Don't You Know" with music and lyrics by Collier, is a track on his 2016 album *In My Room*, with Jacob Collier playing all the instruments; this also features on a live version on the *Family Dinner – Volume 2* (2016) by Snarky Puppy, a contemporary jazz, Latin jazz, funk-based Snarky Puppy band with Collier guesting on keyboards. In both versions the song is set in B flat major with a fairly conventional structure of intro, verse/chorus (x 3), instrumental and outro, and in the live version outlined below, lasts 10'43''.

Just over six minutes into the piece following the second chorus, an extended piano-dominated instrumental interlude led by Collier drops onto a twenty-second-long quasi-dominant pedal on pentatonic F, until at 6'32" there is an unexpected shift not to the expected B flat major opening for the third chorus but to the major pentatonic on E. This surprising direct modulation, with its opening three note "sticks and stones" sung in the first verse as g, b flat, f (now having become g sharp, b natural, f sharp) (Figures 3 & 4), constitutes a jump of an augmented fourth and represents the key event point in the whole piece lying just five seconds away from the mathematical golden section point of 6'37''. Quite remarkably – since this is the only live studio track of the six pieces represented in this study – the overall temporal "distance" between the calculated (for example, mathematical GS point) and the key event point is a mere 0.46% (Figure 5).





FIGURES 3 & 4. The shift from B flat major to E major (transcription by Lukas Lessing, 2021).

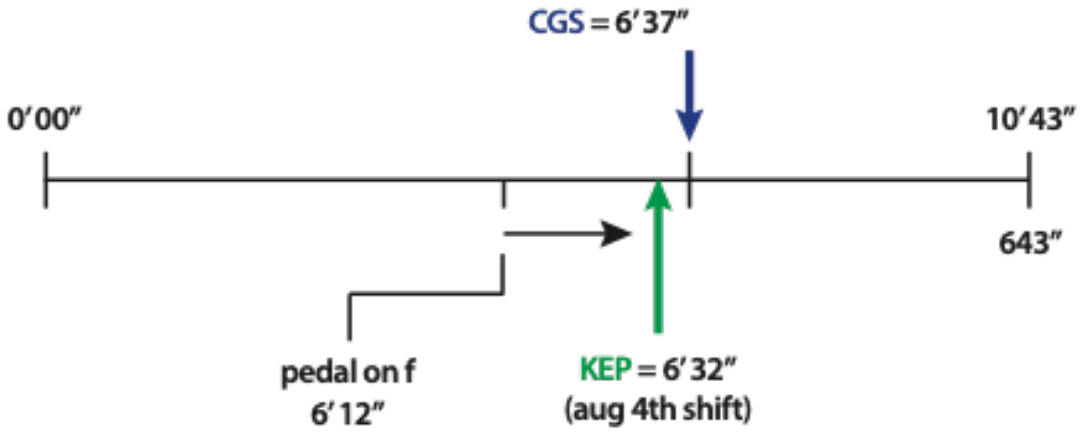


FIGURE 5. The Golden section entry in "Don't You Know" with the shift from the key B flat to E.

Home is

"Home Is", on the *Djesse Vol. 1* album (2018), represents a markedly different style of composition for Jacob Collier, in that it is fully scored in conventional notation, only mirrored by his piece for unaccompanied choir "World O World" on *Djesse Vol. 4*. Performed on the first of Collier's *Djesse* albums by Voces 8, its forty-three bars last nearly six minutes at crotchet = forty, and is unusual in the respect that there are just two words vocalised within the entire piece, and with a very minimal addition from Collier on piano and percussion. In many respects, the piece evokes the aesthetic and stylistic qualities of choral works such as William Byrd or Thomas Tallis, or more recently, Eric Whitacre. Although scored in conventional music

notation, it is very likely that the piece would have been composed, notated and edited within the DAW environment even though ultimately deploying a live choir.

Following a gradually unfolding opening, with short musical phrases punctuated by long silences, and the choir singing wordlessly or just intoning the single word "Home", the piece builds up slowly through a sharp key, C sharp major. Then, following a long seven second silence after the humming of the lowest bass note in the whole piece, C sharp, has died down, Collier suddenly pivots the voices away from C sharp major into a flat key, A flat major. He achieves this by using G sharp, the fifth of the previous key, as an enharmonic link with the tonic of the new key. At the same time, the choir enunciates for the first time the two words "Home Is". This immediate shift from a sharp to flat key is assisted and smoothed by the use of subtle microtonal directions to the singers, which can be seen at bars 25-28 with corresponding directions to lower the pitch of the G sharp in the E major chord in the bass voices by fourteen cents, and to raise the G sharp of the following C sharp major chord by two cents. With the differential between just intonation and equal temperament of a major third being 13.68 cents (Withington 2020), this direction to the vocalists reflects Collier's liking for just intonation as a highlighting device. There is also an additional indicator that this marks the end of a particular expressive landscape; as the C sharp major hummed chord fades, Collier adds a single *sotto voce* timpani hit. Thus, the unexpected enharmonic modulation to A flat major has the effect of what Martin describes as, "occupying a new space within the emotional landscape that feels different somehow" (Martin 2020) (Figure 6).

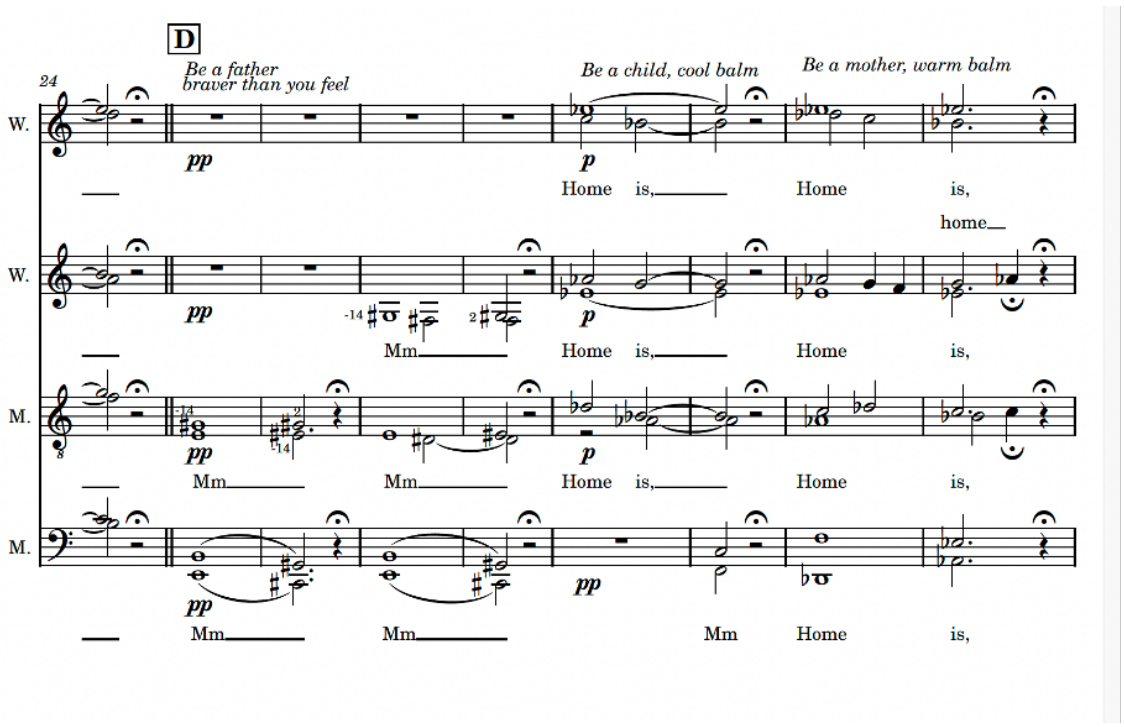


FIGURE 6. Extract from "Home Is" with the enharmonic transition to A flat major at 3'31". Transcription by Barnaby Martin (2021).

This significant and highly expressive point in the whole piece, is constructed through Collier's combinatorial use of silence, a sudden shift from sharp to flat tonality, the first vocal enunciation of "Home is", and the microtonal adjustment to just temperament for the voices and occurs in clock time just three seconds prior to the calculated golden section point of 3'33'' (5'45" = 345" x 0.618 = 213" = 3'33"). Employing a temporal counting of minutes and seconds leads to an overall deviation between the musical and mathematical GS points of just 0.86% deviation (Figure 7), not dissimilar to "Don't You Know" in its close proximity.

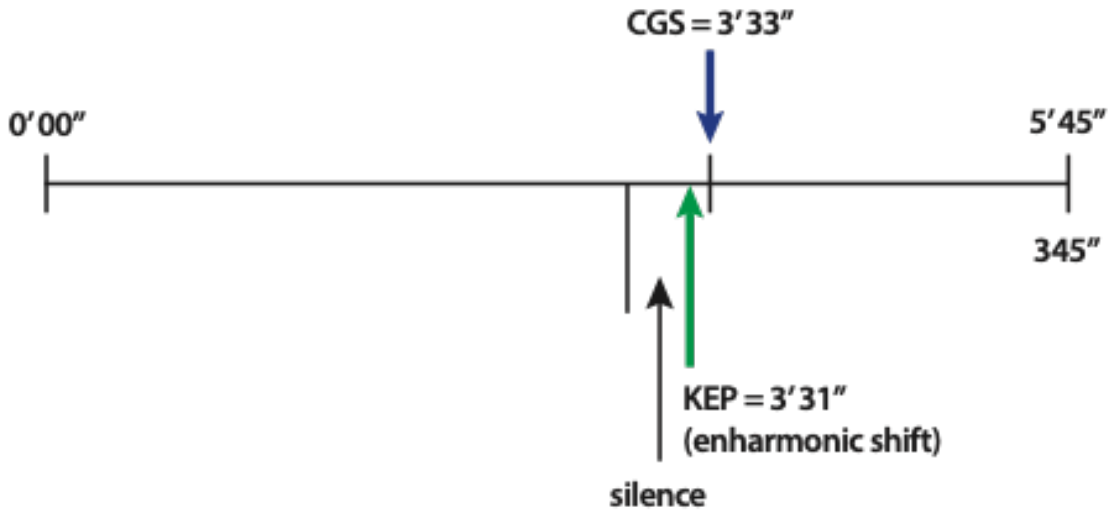


FIGURE 7. The key event point in "Home Is" at the enharmonic shift from sharp to flat.

All Night Long

Found alongside "Home Is" on the *Djesse Vol. 1* album (2018), this arrangement of Lionel Ritchie's well-known 1983 hit incorporates, as part of Collier's DAW-based music production, the Metropole Orkest and Take 6, the *a cappella* gospel-oriented group and the choral group the Aeolians. While Ritchie's original recording is just under four minutes in length, Collier expands this to over seven minutes in a complex instrumental and vocal arrangement, together with improvised jazz-based breaks by Collier counterpointing on keyboard and bass guitar against a brass section, Take 6 and a large vocal section and the orchestra – the album credits indicate approximately 150 musicians involved in the production. The complex Latin jazz arrangement rotates around a range of key centres and extended jazz-oriented harmonic sequences, but at 3'53" the percussion comes to a halt, followed by a fifteen second massive dominant pedal crescendo with an accumulation of instrumental build-up in the orchestra and choir with its climax on the Aeolians' choral exclamation accompanied by brass riffs; if we regard this intense culmination of the build-up as representing a key event point, then clock time measuring places it at 4'30" while mathematically the GS is at 4'31" – in other words, a very small deviation across the piece of -0.22% (Figure 8). After this point

the percussion returns on bongos at 4′47″ with an orchestral mashup following until the fadeout. In his YouTube "Logic Session Breakdown", Collier refers to this GS point as that place where, "energy [is] growing and growing up to this moment which is such a fun moment" (Collier 2019b).

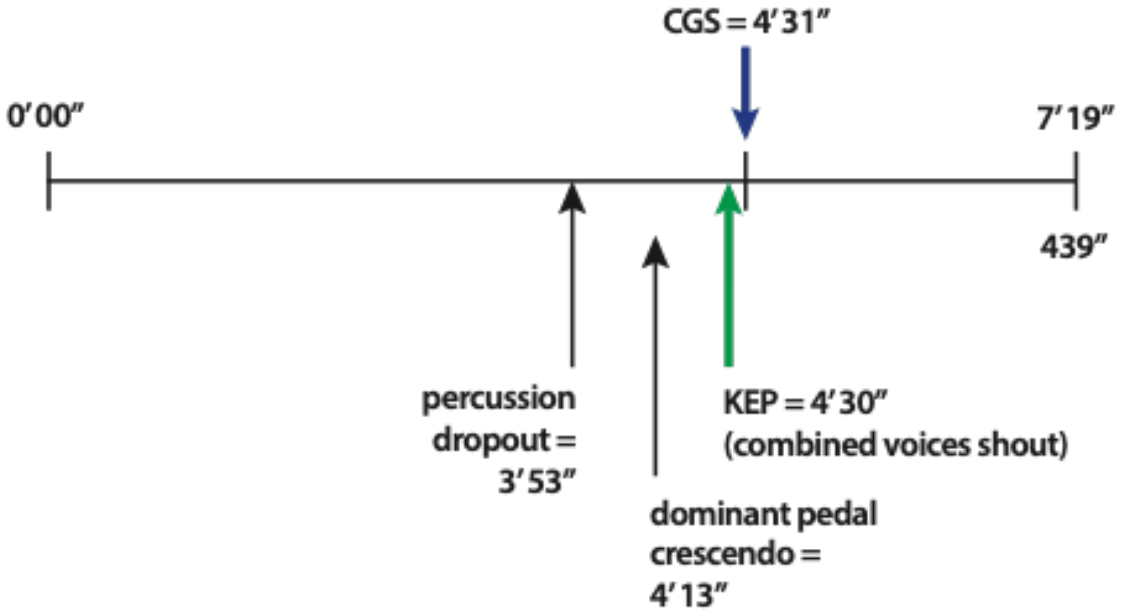


FIGURE 8. The key event point of "All Night Long" at the extended buildup.

Bridge Over Troubled Water

In one of his YouTube "Logic Breakdown" sessions, Collier (2024) explains that his arrangement of this song first began in 2021 when he came across an online video of Yebba singing this Simon and Garfunkel classic; accordingly, for his aspiration of wanting to "do something on a bigger scale" for his *Djesse Vol. 4* release, this version of the song was realised. The scale of the arrangement can be confirmed simply through the sheer number of vocal tracks used on the DAW, that is, some 316. On the YouTube breakdown Collier describes the broad ground plan that he had for the structure of the piece which was heavily influenced by his choice of the three vocalists he chose prior to composition. He sets the three verses of the song in different keys for each of the soloists:

Verse 1 sung by Yabba – A flat major
Verse 2 sung by John Legend – E flat major
Verse 3 sung by Tori Kelly – B major

In the preparation for the final verse, which now closely corresponds to the CGS, Collier states that he had "this big ambition to go to all these different keys [with] quite a specific progression". In effect this is realised as a dramatic shift away from E flat major which closes the second verse sung by John Legend, onto B major, an augmented fifth away. Condensed into just a few bars, the final chords leading out of verse two end on C natural thirteen sharp eleven (C13♯11), where the B flat pivots

enharmonically as an A sharp onto the seventh of the B major added ninth on a pause. Collier describes the emotional impact of this point in the composition: "that chord [B major] means that we're about to be somewhere satisfying…and sure enough, B major …[and] there's a moment of silence here" and that, "the D sharp on the B major chord is dark and flat and justly tuned". Tori Kelly's voice then enters onto a hugely pared down minimalist arrangement, on the words "Sail on, silver girl. Sail on by. Your time has come to shine" (Figure 9). And in order to further emphasise the distinctiveness of this key point in the whole composition Collier goes on to state that, "I made sure that this first phrase with Tori was totally *senza vib* – flat as a pancake" (Collier 2024). If we consider this as a key event point – the combination of a transition to the final verse, a shift to a distant key and a radical change in vocalisation prefaced by a silence – then the entry of the words, "Sail on silver bird" temporally sits just 1.94% away from the calculated golden section point for the piece (Figure 10).

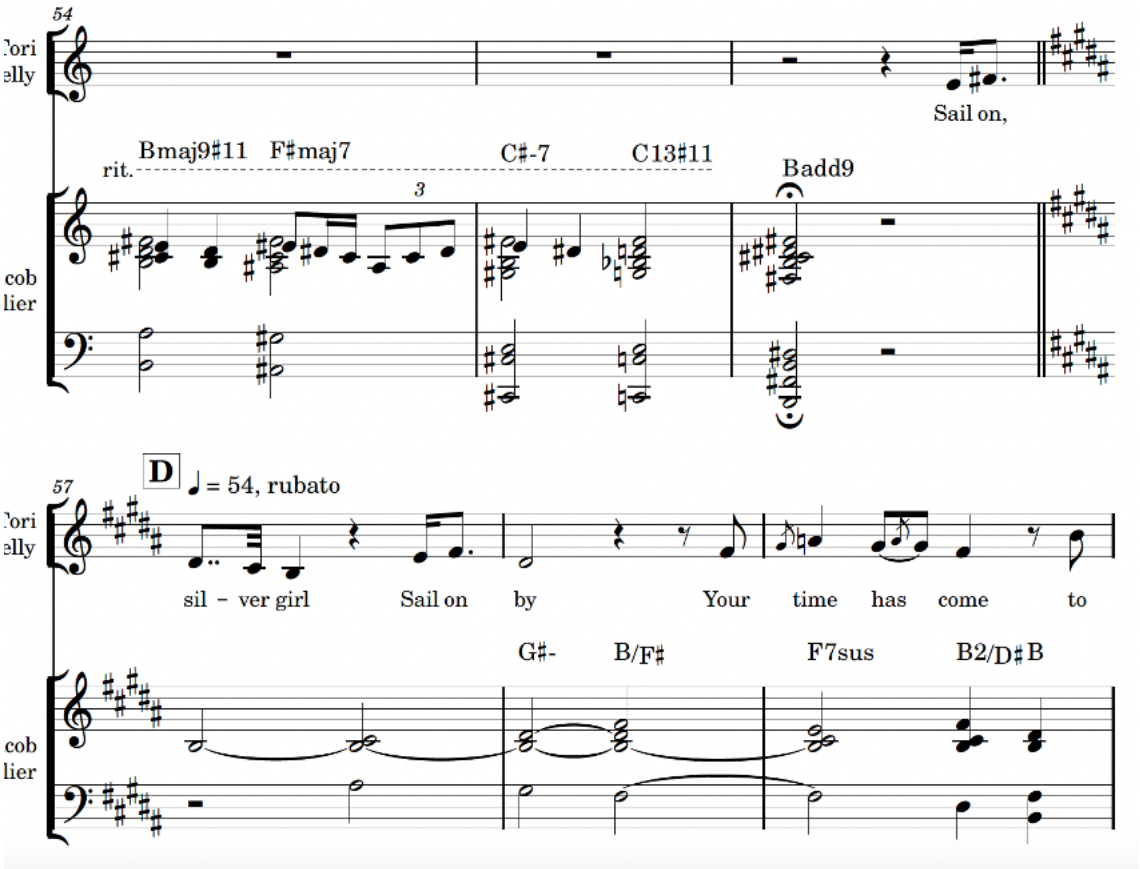


FIGURE 9. Extract from the close of verse 2 of "Bridge Over Troubled Water" transitioning into B major. Since this piece is set across a steady pulse at approx. crotchet = 56 (rubato), then counting bars of the transcription also leads to an identical key event point at bars 56/57 (total bars = 88 x 0.618). Transcription by Felix Broman.

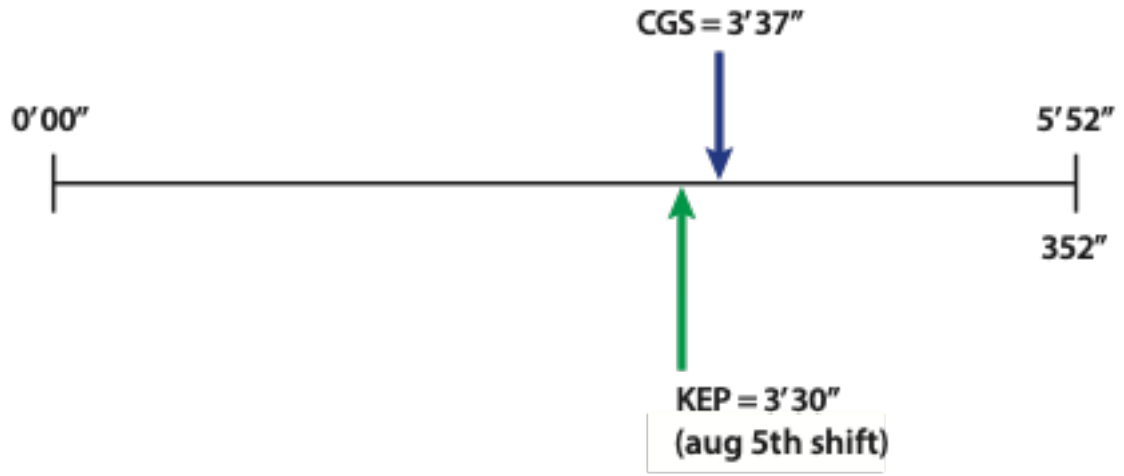


FIGURE 10. The key event point of "Bridge Over Troubled Water" at the beginning of the third verse

Moon River

"Moon River", from *Djesse Vol. 2* (2019) is a radical reformulation and reworking of the classic song by Henry Mancini, with lyrics by Johnny Mercer, originally performed by Audrey Hepburn in the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and popularised by Andy Williams. The original song for the film, simply scored for voice, acoustic guitar and string orchestra is a little over two minutes long; Collier's version on the *Djesse Vol. 2* album from 2019 is four times that, and the pared-down scoring by Mancini is now expanded to up to a 100 layered voices. For this remarkable version of the original song, Collier used a DAW to incorporate both live and MIDI sounds. Structurally speaking it consists of an extended lead in with arhythmic sampled vocals intoning the word "moon", followed by three verses of the song each in a different key. Martin describes the piece as "pushing every aspect of his work to its limit. It contains, microtonality, alternative tuning, eight different keys or pitch centres as well as some of the most complex and dense harmonic language he has ever used" (Martin 2019).

In his YouTube "Logic Session Breakdown" (Collier 2019a), Collier "deconstructs" his composition, outlining his compositional processes and thinking. In this narrative, he describes the critical importance of the last verse in the overall composition, and I suggest, through outlining the compositional procedures he uses, that this is the location of the key event point. Up to this point within the whole arrangement, the extended introduction had begun in B flat major, with the first verse in D flat major, and the second verse in D major. Then, in the transition to the third verse, there occurs a passage which is what Martin describes as, "possibly one of the most developed and complex in all of Jacob Collier's music". In essence, Collier travels from D major through the flat keys of B flat and E flat, then quickly through F sharp major, B minor, and A major finally arriving in the region of B flat. Here we see the shift from A major to B flat major enabled by using a tuning not of A4 = 440Hz but rather A4 = 432Hz. Martin points out that this is "a completely unprepared shift" and since there is "only a small distance

between A in 440 and B flat in 432, the change in pitch is completely disguised". After this densely layered quasi-dominant seventh chord of B flat seven the music then "resolves" onto E flat in this new reference pitch which is, given the microtonal adjustments, essentially D half sharp. In his Logic Breakdown analysis Collier comments that the piece is "entering into the key of D half sharp (…) it's such an exciting place to be" (Collier 2019a). This harmonic transitioning allied to the microtonal shift, is to him a way of "announcing this huge moment" which to him is "really cathartic". On entering this last verse, he says that he has acted to "pull out all the stops" which he achieves primarily through recording ten vocal bass parts as a massive sonic underpinning to the introduction of the final key (bar ninety in the transcription below). He likens this moment in the overall structure as "a totalistic pillar, a totem pole (…) a sense of direction"; this is prefaced by a dominant cluster chord, where half-sharp notes mix with standard tuning (Figure 11). We are therefore now at a significant expressive moment – a key event point – occurring at 5'20" (or bar ninety in the transcription) which represents a temporal deviation from the calculated golden section of fourteen seconds within the eight-minute piece (for example, 496" x 0.618 = 306" or 5'06"), a small 2.82% overall deviation (Figure 12).

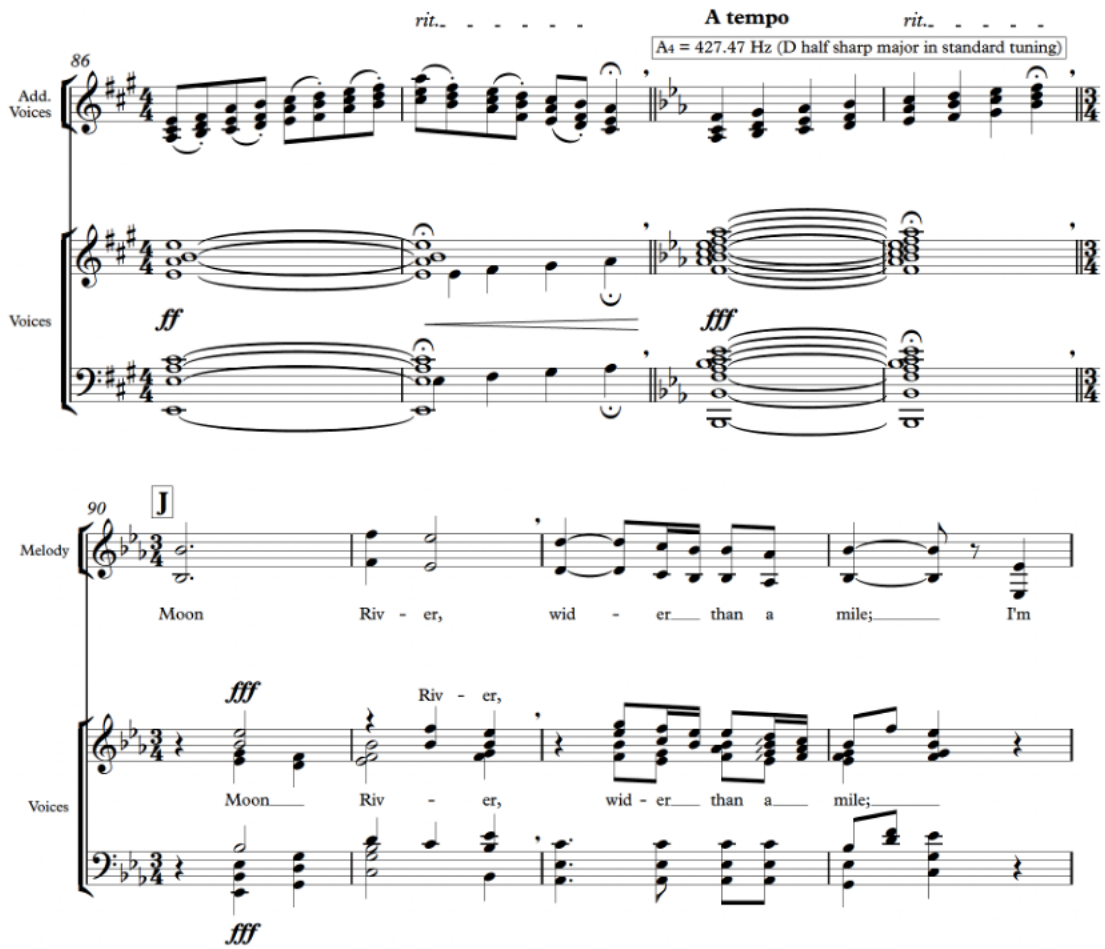


FIGURE 11. The final verse which has landed on E flat major. Transcription courtesy of June Lee (2019). His transcription indicates E flat major as D half sharp major.

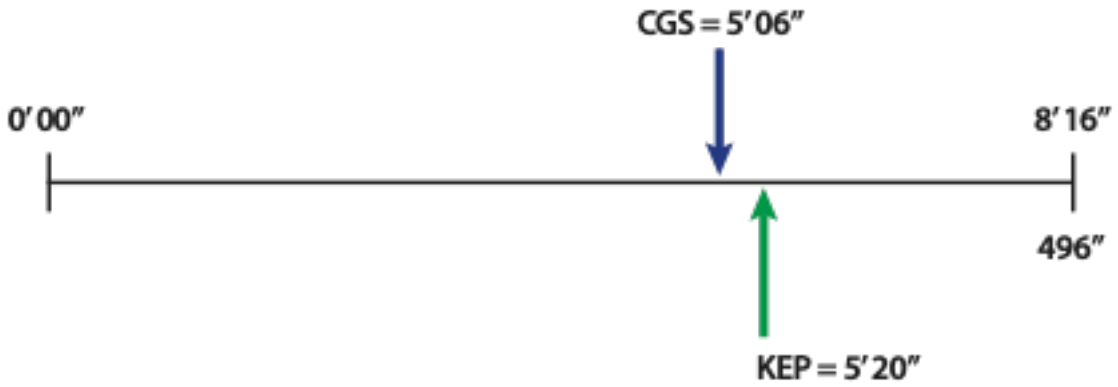


FIGURE 12. The key event point of "Moon River" at the point of the entry into D half sharp major.

The issue of temporal deviation

When considering the significance of a key event point within a musical composition, it is crucial to consider what are acceptable temporal deviations from the mathematically calculated GS point. This is not so straightforward, since as Žuvela points out, "The irrationality of the Golden Ratio constant causes further problems with its application in a discrete medium: it can never be embodied with complete accuracy. Theorists and analysts are therefore often in dispute over the threshold of tolerance of the deviation from the ideal proportion and the determination of a measurement unit sensitive enough but not too small to indicate the significance of the proportion" (Žuvela 2011: 277). Bearing this caution in mind, and looking to earlier GS studies in classical music, we can see that, for example, in his analysis of Puccini's Act 1 love duet in La Bohème, Atlas suggests a deviation up to 2.6% might be acceptable (Atlas 2003: 277), and in his exploration of the GS in the music of Shostakovich, Rofe offers a deviation of between 1.5 to 2.5% (Rofe 2008: 32) as being appropriate.

With reference to the GS in popular music, this deviation figure is mirrored in the non-score-based methodology study of Collins and Dunn (2021) where the researchers noted that the majority of forty-five tracks from albums by Dzihan and Kamien were "well below" (2021: 122) the researchers' set deviation threshold of 3.5%: in the six works by Collier outlined above, the overall deviation of the key event point from the calculated golden section point lies between 0.22% and 2.82% (Table 1). Adams states that GS proportions might be "perilously close" to the common division of one third/two thirds in much music (Adams 1996: 243). However, by way of example, in "Little Blue" there is a 1.5% deviation, which corresponds to just four seconds between the CGS and the KEP. Had the "rule of thirds" applied, then this would conversely translate to any significant musical event (for example the middle eight) lying some twenty-four seconds away from the CGS; in the case of "Don't You Know", this point would sit twenty-seven seconds away rather than the observed GS point of three seconds; and in the case of "All Night Long", two thirds of the way into the song would translate into an eighteen

second deviation rather than one second from the calculated Golden Section. Hence, it is difficult to concur with Adams' concern that, "Slightly overshooting the first [third] or undershooting the second can easily bring the composer into the purview of GS" (Adams 1996: 243-244). It may be useful to recall that Adams' calculations were predicated on a methodology of counting bars rather than clock time. In this context, Winterson points out that the verse/chorus, one-third/two-thirds convention in popular music "is the approximate point where the middle eight, a contrasting section, is most frequently to be found" and in suggesting that this is commensurate with GS proportions says that, "A clear example of GS in pop music can be found in Lady Gaga's 2016 song 'Perfect Illusion' where there is a dramatic key change at exactly this point; the song is 179 seconds long and the key change happens at 111 seconds (179 x 0.618 = 110.622)" (Winterson 2024: 161). However, the two-thirds point would actually lie at 179 x 0.66 = 118, or some seven seconds away from the GS point.

To illustrate this point, the following table indicates the deviation in seconds of the key event point from the calculated GS in each of Collier's six pieces; the number in brackets is the alternative deviation point predicated on the two-thirds/one-third basis:

TABLE 1. Temporal deviation in seconds in ascending order, all data a-d in seconds.
a = length of song
b = calculated golden section (CGS) (a x 0.618)
c = key event point (KEP)
d = differential between b and c in seconds
e = deviation as a percentage of total duration from b [d/a x100]

	a	b	c	d	e
All Night Long	439	271	270 (289)	1 (18)	0.22
Don't you know	643	397	394 (424)	3 (27)	0.46
Home is	345	213	210 (227)	3 (14)	0.86
Little Blue	265	163	159 (175)	4 (12)	1.5
Bridge over troubled water	352	217	210 (232)	7 (15)	1.94

Moon River	496	306	320 (327)	14 (21)	2.82

Finally, this exploration of GS proportionality in the music of Jacob Collier has been supported by Collier's own narrative in his online "Logic Breakdown Sessions" where he sometimes spends up to an hour describing his compositional processes at the DAW. These have been invaluable in illuminating the analysis presented here, and I have presented the relevant commentary at Table 2. It can be seen that Collier has a liking for marking the key event point with unexpected harmonic shifts to unrelated keys and new instrumental/vocal entries acting as highlighting and expressive devices.

TABLE 2. Summary of musical markers for GS event points.

	Key event point description	Collier commentary
Little Blue	Changed arrangement Entry of audience choir	"these three choirs become the underpinning voices"
Don't You Know	Shift to distant key (augmented fourth to E major pentatonic) after pedal on F.	n/a
Home Is	Choral enunciation of words together with an enharmonic shift from sharp to flat key.	n/a
All Night Long	Extended dominant pedal crescendo	"energy growing and growing up to this moment which is such a fun moment"
Bridge Over Troubled Water	Shift to distant key (augmented fifth to B major) at beginning of third verse, with introduction of female vocals	"that chord means that we're about to be somewhere satisfying (…) and sure enough, B major (...) [and] there's a moment of silence here"
Moon River	Shift to distant key (augmented fourth to D half sharp/ E flat major: beginning of third verse	"announcing this huge moment" (…) [which is] really cathartic (…) [and where I] "pull out all the stops"

Conclusion

From the analysis of these six diverse pieces by Jacob Collier some considerations emerge. Firstly, as I have indicated earlier, it is necessary to question whether the established methodology observed in many studies – in the realm of classical music – of counting bars in a musical score to determine golden section proportionality is

an appropriate methodology to apply to popular music, which is rarely contingent upon the initial production of a musical score. While this counting methodology has been generally accepted by scholars as being isomorphically congruent with the methodology of measuring distances and lengths to assess the location of the golden section in a visual artefact, it ignores the notion that in popular music our perception and understanding of recorded music exists temporally rather than via a musical score. This latter is described by Tagg as "notational centricity" where "the score is treated as a reification of the composition" (Tagg 1987: 5). Certainly, we can see that through the non-score-based methodology adopted here, there is a real opportunity to explore GS proportionality in temporal terms.

The question may then arise as to whether the listener can actually apprehend temporal GS proportions in a musical work; the comprehension of proportions within an unfolding *gestalt* of a piece of music, in comparison with viewing a painting, an architectural form or other spatial artefact, may be more problematic, since, as Reybrouck has suggested, "music, as a temporal art, is essentially discursive. In contrast with a geometrical figure, that is described as a whole when looking at it, a musical figure needs a successive presentation" (Reybrouck 1997: 64). As Atlas drily suggests, this is "a far more complicated affair than that of spatial proportions, which are nice enough to stand still" (Atlas 2003: 282). While there are empirical studies regarding visual perception of the GS (for example, McManus and Weatherby 1997; McWhinnie 1987; and Benjafield's useful 2010 metastudy) there are no comparable studies, to this author's knowledge, in the field of music perception. This issue may be an analytical *cul-de-sac* however; the structural perception of a piece of music can only be an after-the-event phenomenon since, as Boykan points out: "you can easily compare lengths in the visual world, but it is rather a stretch to ask us to keep track of a ratio in a situation of gradual unfolding" (Boykan 2004: 25-26) a point echoed by Phillips (2019). Nonetheless, further exploration of listeners' temporal apprehension of GS proportions in a piece of music may yet yield interesting insights.

As any discussion of how any golden section in popular music may be perceived is beyond the scope of this paper, this too applies to the matter of compositional intentionality: are writers consciously aware of the GS ratio while putting together a piece of music, a song, or instrumental track for instance? Some earlier classical-based studies have suggested that there has been some conscious intentionality by different composers; for example Howat (1993: 164-168) discusses the possibility that Debussy may have been influenced by musical proportionality through his circle of friends in Paris, as well as the contemporary Symbolist movement in the visual arts, and there is some evidence from Bartók's work on Turkish folk songs that may offer evidence of deliberate mathematical/proportional construction (Winterson 2025: 169-170). Adams (1996) explores a range of possibilities that Satie may have learned of the GS from a range of non-musical sources, but concludes that there is no evidence to prove that Satie actually knew of the GS. More recently, Collins and Dunn (2021) in their case-study asked their composers/producers whether they had deliberately aligned some forty-five of their musical tracks with the GS, but this too yielded an unclear outcome (2021: 124). And there is nothing in Collier's many YouTube presentations which would indicate that he had deliberately intended to associate his creative output with GS

proportions. Composer intentionality and the GS could well be another fruitful area for further exploration.

Given the fact that Jacob Collier almost exclusively writes his music using a DAW, the further question may arise as to whether or not this compositional affordance introduces a certain degree of sensory interchange between the visual and the musical/aural domains. In other words, we might consider whether these screen-based tools might, as Collins and Dunn suggest, "naturally engage a visual, holistic appreciation of possible golden section proportions upon the computer screen which might then in turn be translated into temporal music and sound events" (2011: 123). Macchiusi captures such possibilities in his account of the visualisation of sound describing the affordance of the DAW in comparison to a conventional musical score: "While being spatially vague in regard to time, a musical score is not reductive enough to capture the broad sweeps of the arrange window's (3) synoptic representation" (Macchiusi 2017: 129). It may well be that this visual, synoptic overview of an emerging composition affords the artist working with digital tools that enhanced permeability between the visual and the aural where golden section proportions fuse into one *Gestalt*. Strachan speaks of the overlapping of "visual and sonic affordances" within the DAW, and that visual affordances "serve to reconstruct thought about the conceptual ordering of music within the creative process" (Strachan 2017: 92). Writing before the inception of the DAW, Bonds articulates this visual overlap perfectly, "We know that musical form is in one sense temporal (…) the power of the synoptic image is so great that in our minds the form of a work can become a kind of imagined space in which the music operates" (Bonds 2010: 302). Therefore, does a DAW enhance that creative permeability between the visual and the aural – are the musically pleasing proportions of a song, for example, perceived in the writer's mind not only from their aural engagement with the unfolding work, but also visually?

Finally, the centrality of measuring time in the UI of the DAW may enhance the above permeability between the visual and the aural in the process of musical creativity. Through what Reuter describes as the advent of "new temporalities in the DAW" (Reuter 2012: 5), where digital production processes fundamentally impact our perception of, and engagement with musical time, the design of the DAW interface enables a dynamic and very real intersection of time with compositional musical activity: time – as clock time – is foregrounded in terms of the DAW's visual-spatial UI. For example, time is represented horizontally left to right, quantified numerically into minutes and seconds (or in the SMPTE time code graphic into hundredths of seconds), divided into grid structures, and timelines and tempo displays. This foregrounding may then directly shape how musicians perceive and manipulate time in the act of composing, and further impact upon matters of structural proportionality. Together with matters of composer intentionality previously mentioned, this issue might only be fully determined through undertaking observational case studies with DAW-based composers in the role of co-researchers (see for example, Burnard 2016; Collins 2001; Collins and Dunn 2011; Persson and Robson 1995).

In conclusion, in this study I have presented six varied pieces by Jacob Collier from across four albums which – through the use of a non-score based, clock time-contingent methodology – demonstrate a fascinating temporal correspondence with golden section proportionality. With the GS based as it is upon irrational numbers,

this proportionality appears to be defined by points of musical emphasis – those key event points which can include silences, sudden key shifts, new instrumental or vocal entries, climactic points and other expressive features – rather than correlating with a particular song structure, such as AABA, predicated on integer multiples of rational numbers such as four, eight and sixteen. This tentative opening up the study of GS proportionality in terms of temporal parameters, to encompass the world of popular music, reflects my overall aim, to "construct something that works cognitively, that fits together and handles new cases, that may implement further inquiry and invention" (Goodman 1978: 163). In this aim it has echoed Moore's concerns with "the wholesale importation of analytical methods borrowed from musical analysis and applied to popular music" (Moore 2003: 9) and postulated an alternative to simply cutting and pasting those notation-centric methodologies which have been derived from classical, predominantly European music tradition, onto contemporary musicological practice. Hopefully, such a move may confirm that this temporal understanding of the Golden Section in popular music offers "a rich set of possibilities for future research" (Žuvela 2011: 280).

Endnotes

(1) Alongside this range of scholarly publications, there are currently also a range of popular GS apps for example, Altrise - a "design tool for artists, designers, programmers, photographers. It allows you to design using the golden section property"; PhiMatrix – "apply the Golden Ratio in any kind of design"; Iratio- "the app is designed for graphic designers, architects, website designers (…)". A host of online videos explore the GS in car design.

(2) I am applying here what Lendvai refers to as the "positive" (long musical section followed by shorter section for example, 0.618/0.312) rather than the "negative" short musical section followed by longer section at 0.312/0.618 (Lendvai 1979: 20–21).

(3) The arrange window is one of several modes of the graphical representation of sound in a DAW where audio and MIDI parts are recorded, imported and organised as "regions" within a track listing for subsequent editing.

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Drumming for Change: The Case Study of Rhythms of Resistance Tallinn

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Abstract

Music has long been recognised as a powerful resource for uniting people around shared ideas, making it an effective tool for political activism. In this article, we examine an activist percussion group, Rhythms of Resistance (RoR) Tallinn, to identify key aspects of their activism by analysing video footage of their performance at Tallinn Pride 2023. Additional data include a focus group interview with three RoR Tallinn members and an ethnographic account. Our main research questions are: what key performance practices characterise RoR Tallinn's activist drumming, and how do these practices localise transnational protest repertoires in the Estonian context within the post-Soviet Baltic-Nordic region? Our analysis identified four interrelated thematic dimensions: (1) the use of tactical frivolity; (2) distributed leadership; (3) care across multiple in-group and outward-reaching layers; and (4) embodied individual experience. We argue that RoR Tallinn functions not only as a form of protest but as a care-oriented, embodied practice that sustains activists and

reshapes protest culture through music. By situating this under-researched movement within the Estonian activist music scene, the study contributes to a broader understanding of music activism in the Baltic-Nordic region, demonstrating how musical participation serves as a multidimensional tool for social change, collective identity, and emotional well-being.

KEYWORDS: music activism, identity politics, care, tactical frivolity, Pride, Estonia

Introduction

In Estonia, as in many other countries, music has long served as a tool for raising awareness about pressing social and political issues, reflecting the widely recognised political capacity of music and sound (Sakakeeny 2024: 310). In this article, we explore music activism through a case study of the grassroots anarchist percussion group Rhythms of Resistance (RoR) Tallinn (est. 2018). By focusing on RoR Tallinn, we examine how transnational activist networks and repertoires – such as samba-inspired protest drumming – are adapted to local struggles, in particular those related to LGBTQ+ rights, environmental justice, and anti-authoritarian politics in Estonia.

Earlier scholarship on music activism often focused on Western or Nordic countries (Eyerman & Jamison 1998; Ramstedt et al. 2025). More recent research has expanded geographically, examining, for example, protest music in post-Fukushima Japan (Manabe 2016), political sonic protests in Thailand (Tausig 2019), the sung resistance in post-apartheid South Africa (Jolaosho 2019), the repurposing of antifascist music legacies in the Balkans (Hofman 2020), and ethnographic perspectives on Palestinian protest music (McDonald 2013). Despite this growing body of scholarship, activist music in post-Soviet societies – where civic activism and public protest follow historical and cultural trajectories – remains underexamined. Recent work has begun to address this gap (Dundua 2024, Davidjants & Raju 2025, Raju & Davidjants 2024). Our study of RoR Tallinn within Estonia's civic culture extends this line.

To understand the role of music in everyday do-it-yourself (DIY) activism in this region, our main research questions are: what key performance practices characterise RoR Tallinn's activist drumming, and how do these practices localise transnational protest repertoires in the Estonian context within the Baltic-Nordic region?

Our analysis of RoR Tallinn's participation in Tallinn Pride 2023 suggests that the group approaches music activism as a relational and organisational process rather than a series of spontaneous protests and sees activist music operating not only as a mechanism of message transmission but also as a care-oriented, embodied practice sustaining participation over time. In our view, this shows that activist music sustains protest less through ideological persuasion than through an embodied practice of participation and care that enables the movement to endure. The analysis also shows that RoR Tallinn's activism combines carnivalesque public performances, non-hierarchical group organisation, practices of care, and embodied participation. Taken together, these elements suggest that RoR Tallinn's activist music functions as a social infrastructure that enacts, rather than merely represents, the movement's political message.

The case study reported below demonstrates that music and activism, rather than operating as separate strategies, become intertwined in performance situations to create synergies that allow them to amplify each other. Although grounded in a specific post-Soviet setting – Estonia in the first half of the 2020s – the article offers transferable analytical insight into how transnational protest repertoires are localised in comparable civic contexts, thereby expanding existing scholarship on activist music practices in particular socio-cultural situations.

The cultural roots of RoR Tallinn lie in local anarchist music and activism in Estonia from the nineteen-eighties through the twenty-tens. The group includes members of various nationalities who have come together to employ music activism to address, in the Estonian setting, issues central to the RoR movement: environmental concerns, political change, anarchist ideas, LGBTQ+ rights, et cetera. Given the paucity of academic research on RoR and its history, the following two sections mostly draw on RoR's global website, the RoR Tallinn Facebook page and secondary sources (interviews and ethnographic data – hereafter 'fieldwork materials' (FM). After presenting the methodology, findings from the case study are discussed, followed by concluding remarks.

Key Concepts in the Service of Musical Protest

The "sonic turn" has recontextualised music within a broader field of sound, foregrounding the social and material contexts in which sound is produced and experienced. This perspective is particularly relevant in protest settings, where soundscapes, voice, listening, and collective presence shape political experience. Scholars have emphasised music and sound's capacity to organise and strengthen social identity, and to model alternative forms of social organisation (Sakakeeny 2024: 310–311). To examine how political meaning is produced through collective sound and movement in public space for RoR Tallinn, this analysis draws on four interrelated concepts: carnival protests – in the form of tactical frivolity; feminist care ethics; distributed leadership; and embodied participatory performance.

The notion of carnival protest draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, characterised by festive, playful practices that defy official culture and established hierarchies. Since the Global Justice Movement at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, such practices have become increasingly prominent in street protests, mobilising humour, celebration, and visual spectacle to foster optimism, empowerment and collective engagement (Hammond 2020: 265–269). The carnivalesque operates as a tactical intervention by creating a temporary break with the accepted social order, joyfully subverting (gender) norms and hierarchies. The slogan "Participate, don't spectate" encapsulates the main ideas of street parties and tactical carnivals by contradicting the idea of experts and opening a space for horizontal participation (Scholl 2012: 86).

Within this broader repertoire of contention – including a range of colourful protest tools extending from assemblies and strikes to artistic and performative actions – tactical frivolity represents a specific anarcho-pacifist tactic that combines colour, sound, and movement with humour to produce non-violent yet creative forms of disruption (Tilly 1995; Scholl 2012: 92). Its effectiveness lies in exploiting the ambivalent position of carnival as poised between aesthetics and politics

(Pereen 2007: 78): carnival protest can both unmask authority and challenge the self-imposed seriousness of traditional leftist activism. As intentional carnival, tactical frivolity deliberately injects the carnivalesque spirit into political action in order to appeal to and engage wider publics (Hammond 2020: 270).

Feminist care ethics conceptualises care not merely as a private or familial activity, but sees it as gendered, raced, and classed. Ethical qualities include attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (Tronto 1993: 112, 127–136). This positions care as a political practice that can be used to address vulnerability and inequality. Anarcho-feminist approaches extend this perspective by emphasising horizontal power-sharing grounded in mutual care, compassion, survival, and resilience, highlighting how care can structure collective political action and community formation. In such settings, permissiveness and experimentation can open spaces where equal power relations are practiced rather than merely claimed (Jeppesen 2019: 119–120).

Distributed leadership (horizontality) represents the organisational manifestation of prefigurative politics. By rejecting fixed hierarchies and emphasising horizontality, activist groups enact the egalitarian social relations they aim to promote. Rooted in anarchist traditions, prefigurative politics emphasises participatory democracy, horizontality, inclusiveness, and direct action, stressing the importance of practicing non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian forms of social organisation rather than deferring political change to a distant future (Fians 2022).

Within debates on music activism, Green and Street (2018) suggest that musical politics operates across both prefigurative and pragmatic modes. They describe the prefigurative role of music as enabling participants to inhabit desired social relations within the act of musicking itself, while pragmatic practices seek to influence political processes beyond the immediate performance context. This perspective reinforces the idea of music as a space where political relations are practiced rather than merely expressed.

Protest studies have outlined "vernaculars of sonic dissent", underscoring music and sound's capacity to foster social cohesion, embodiment, and political expression in direct action (Tausig 2018, Sakakeeny 2024: 312). Building on Blacking's (1977) notion of embodied politics, protest music is not only heard but also physically felt, enabling spontaneous coordinated movements in collective enactment (Trainor and Hannon 2013: 432). Such shared movement can cultivate collective consciousness and deepen interpersonal connections through musical participation (Blacking 1977: 23). Abe (2018) further demonstrates how street performance can transform protest from a solemn expression of grief or silent mourning into a shared bodily experience through humour, movement, and sonic energy, highlighting the political capacity of musical participation to reorganise how protest is felt.

The embodied dimension is particularly evident in protest drumming groups, such as the RoR movement, where sound and movement function as tools of collective expression in public space. Ellman (2020: 242) identifies two techniques in street marching bands: chant breaks and sonic disobedience. Chant breaks temporarily replace instrumental sound with rhythmic chanting, enabling the crowd to join in, energising the protest and reinforcing collective identity. Sonic disobedience strategically uses the sound to reclaim public space from surveillance and control. Complementing this perspective, Henriques's (2010: 83) "vibration

model" conceptualises musical participation as the interaction of corporeal and sonic frequencies experienced as vibes rather than abstract knowledge, highlighting how political coordination emerges through shared sensory experience.

Musical Activism and Anarchist Ideas in Estonia

Before introducing RoR Tallinn, we first need to sketch out the local context in which RoR-style DIY anarchist principles in music intersect with humour, feminist thought, green politics, LGBTQ+ activism, and related causes in Estonia. RoR Tallinn did not appear in isolation but emerged from a broader continuum of socially conscious musical practices and anarchist activism in the region, with roots in the late Soviet and the subsequent transition periods. In this sense, RoR Tallinn exemplifies how global movements are adapted to local conditions. The overview below outlines this context and highlights key continuities.

The origins of anarchist musical activism in Estonia can be traced to the 1980s, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Davidjants 2025: 81). In Western Europe and the Nordic countries, including Estonia's neighbour Finland, the 1980s was a decade that – inspired by punk, anarchism, and libertarian-left ideals – gave rise to protest movements opposing both the welfare state and right-wing politics (Hill 2024). Influenced by these cultural trends and reacting to the local constraints of the late-Soviet period, anarchist musical activism in Estonia was born. The 1986 "phosphorite war" – a wave of protests against Moscow's plans to start large-scale (environmentally destructive) mining of phosphorite in North-East Estonia – became a catalyst for ecological mobilisation. Punk scenes responded through bands such as J.M.K.E., which combined DIY music practices with anti-authoritarian and pacifist ideas. Their song *"Käed üles Virumaa"* ("Hands Up, Virumaa") wove together themes of Estonian identity, occupation politics, and potential environmental disaster (Davidjants 2025: 78–84). These repertoires of music-as-protest ultimately led to the Singing Revolution (1987–1991), during which collective singing became an instrument of mass political agency in all three Baltic states (Šmidchens 2014: 3–6).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s, the nexus of culture, heritage and ideological opposition to totalitarianism weakened in Estonia (Davidjants 2022: 7). Nevertheless, the early 2000s saw a resurgence of the anarchist movement. Groups with explicit ideological messages emerged, such as the anarcho-pacifist collective *PunaMust* [Red-Black], founded in 2006 (Muttika 2006). In 2011, an antifascist, non-hierarchical DIY music and culture club opened in Tallinn. Describing itself as a community centre, it also provided rehearsal space for RoR Tallinn, whose members share similar values of social justice, anarchism, and an ethic of care. To date, no other venue in Estonia has maintained such a long and stable history of hosting antifa bands and supporting similar activities (FM: 20.06.2023).

In the 2010s, the global feminist movement of DIY cultural activism in music reached Estonia. LadyFest Tallinn – a community-based, not-for-profit music and arts festival for feminist and women artists – was held annually between 2011 and 2019, bringing together, among others, anarcha-feminist musicians and bands for concerts and workshops (including one led by RoR Tallinn) (FM: 20.06.2023). With

overlapping membership and shared values, these various scenes have often collaborated.

Today in Estonia, there are also non-anarchist artists and music collectives whose work carries a distinctly feminist and human rights message. In addition to a number of other queer bands and artists, a good example is the openly LGBTQ+ mixed choir *Vikerlased*, which is not directly involved in politics but considers it important to perform at Pride festivals to highlight the presence of LGBTQ+ artists – a practice that constitutes activism in its own right (Davidjants & Raju 2025).

Rhythms of Resistance Tallinn in Local and Global Context

The first RoR group emerged in London in 2000 as a response to police repression during the Reclaim the Streets protests (1) and soon developed into an international music-based activist movement. Like many contemporary social movements (Hill 2024), ROR operates as a loosely organised transnational network shaped by shared political principles and local socio-political contexts. Today, the RoR network comprises around seventy-five independent activist drumming groups worldwide (Rhythms of Resistance no date), making RoR Tallinn part of a transnational, anti-hierarchical, anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, and anti-racist network committed to social and ecological justice. The movement draws inspiration from Brazil's *blocos afros* of the mid-seventies – a cultural resistance movement rooted in Black consciousness that stood up to military dictatorship (Rhythms of Resistance no date). Similarly, RoR challenges systemic racism, exploitation, and social exclusion in education, employment, and healthcare (Moving Spirits Inc. 2025).

In Estonia, RoR functions both as a part of this global movement and as a localised initiative; in addition to the group in Tallinn (the capital of Estonia) there was, at least until 2022, also one in Tartu. With strong connections to other RoR groups, particularly in Lithuania and Finland, RoR activists in Estonia form an international network – connected via chats and social media – that shares overarching principles while adapting to local specificities. RoR members frequently attend local rehearsals when visiting other countries, exchanging stories of demonstrations, discussing local struggles, and playing together (Dundua 2024: 16).

The blend of global solidarity and localised activism of RoR Tallinn reflects the core principles of the twenty-first century antifascist anarchism (see, for example, Bray 2017), engaging in a wide range of injustices. RoR Tallinn approaches human rights activism intersectionally, recognising oppression in any field. Based on the activists' personal backgrounds and involvement, the group champions causes such as animal rights, LGBTQ+ equality, and environmental justice, while also addressing local concerns from traffic safety to urban nature preservation, campaigning for a fur-free Europe, standing in solidarity with Iranian women, and opposing the Hungarian government and Russia's war in Ukraine (RoR Tallinn Facebook page; FM: 20.06.2023).

Similarly to global RoR, participation in RoR Tallinn does not require having a specific ethnic or linguistic background, as the group includes a significant number of foreign nationals or temporary residents. Organised entirely by volunteers, RoR groups operate on a decentralised and democratic basis, reflecting resistance to

hierarchy. Thus, there is no leader, and decisions are made based on consensus within each group, and newcomers have the same voice as long-standing members (Rhythms of Resistance no date). The distributed (horizontal) leadership style of the group is also illustrated by the position of the *mestre* who leads the group during the performances. The gender-neutral term, which stems from the Afro-Brazilian origins of the RoR, also conveys the egalitarian message that the role is open to anyone.

The practice of distributed leadership extends to musical practice. Members are encouraged to experiment with instruments, become more comfortable with different tunes and sometimes improvise if they want to, instead of strictly following existing score sheets. Such a playful approach to music-making supports a judgement-free space that fosters creativity, collective responsibility, and embodied participation (FM: 20.06.2023).

Street protests constitute a primary arena for RoR Tallinn's activism, where rhythmic drumming plays a central role, functioning as a political act rather than a conventional music performance (FM: 20.06.2023). This aligns with broader scholarship suggesting that in such contexts, music is not the *raison d'être* but serves to amplify protest messages, foster belonging and mobilise collective action (Juris 2014: 244). In such participatory performance, stylised sound and motion are conceptualised most importantly as heightened social interactions (Turino 2008: 28). Thus, RoR Tallinn's activism amplifies their message in a creative and powerful way. As one participant stated, "It's actually a very Estonian thing to fight with music (2), and people can relate to it much more easily than to protests where people just stand there" (FM: 20.06.2023).

During demonstrations, RoR attends to all aspects of the process – from clothing and movement coordination to dynamics between group members – presenting a unified collective expression that functions as a political intervention in public space. For a percussion group, rhythmic coordination combined with actions such as walking elicits spontaneous physical responses and facilitates engagement among participants and bystanders alike (Trainor and Hannon 2013: 432). RoR thus seeks not merely to perform to an audience but to engage everyone present via music, minimising the distinction between performers and participants (Turino 2008: 29).

Musically and performance-wise, the RoR movement is inspired by samba and carnival traditions, which are both carnivalesque in their capacity to challenge hierarchies of power (Hammond 2020: 266). The samba-inspired rhythms characteristic of RoR Tallinn create a joyful musical protest while fostering collective identity and participatory engagement.

With the exception of some local songs and hand signs (FM: 20.06.2023), all groups within the RoR network play the same tunes and use the same signs, enabling them to communicate over loud drumming and form larger groups consisting of different local cells. Several interviewees emphasised the fact that Estonia is a safe place and that they have a high level of trust in law enforcement compared to their countries of origin or residence where this is not necessarily the case. Thus, in addition to music-related signs, safety signals might be used where necessary – for example "Danger!", "Police are coming!", or more personal signals like "I do not feel safe" (FM: 20.06.2023).

The tunes in the RoR sheet book (see sub-section "Player" at RoR global website) hold historical and semiotic significance, often named after certain persons or activism-related symbols known to participants (Rhythms of Resistance no date). While this is not overtly secretive – since all information is publicly available on the RoR website – it provides an opportunity to incorporate additional layers of meaning, particularly in contexts where direct political messaging may be restricted. Each RoR group embraces local influences while avoiding cultural appropriation, and local groups can make tunes which, if sufficiently catchy, may eventually be added to the main site and thus become accessible to other groups in other geographical locations. In the case of Estonia and Finland, the tunes (respectively) of "Kaera-Jaan" and "Pekurinen" have been adapted and added to the sheet book section of the RoR site (FM: 20.06.2023) (for more details see below).

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we analysed one specific event, Tallinn Pride 2023: its musical and visual codes, shouted slogans, and broader social context. The primary dataset consisted of a video recording of the performance, complemented by a focus group interview and ethnographic fieldwork that link observed practices to participants' interpretations. Special focus was placed on the mental well-being of participants and on the embodied dimensions of performance, exploring how meaning was conveyed not only through sound, but also through movement and affective engagement.

The study represents a collaboration of three authors with complementary expertise in music, activism, and social inclusion. Davidjants works as a researcher in musicology but has also been involved in Estonian feminist and LGBTQ+ rights movements. Both Davidjants and Raju have experience with social issues in the public sector. Dundua conducted five months of ethnographic fieldwork with RoR Tallinn for her master's thesis (Dundua 2024) and continued her involvement with the group for about a year.

Observational data were collected during the Tallinn Pride procession in June 2023, when Raju filmed approximately fifty-nine minutes of RoR Tallinn's performance with prior consent from participants. She later analysed video data, using the multimodal analysis method to identify multiple musical, verbal, and visual modes of communication both individually and as part of a unified activist message. The footage was systematically reviewed to produce a detailed timeline of activities, leadership transitions, chants, and visual presentation. Following Mondada's (2008) notion of "naturally occurring data", the event was analysed across three phases: pre-procession, procession, and post-procession. While repeated viewing enabled detailed annotation, some subjectivity remains due to the challenges of documenting a large moving group in a crowded environment.

A focus group interview providing additional qualitative data was conducted a few days after the procession with three RoR members (all women in their twenties and thirties). Due to the participants' different linguistic backgrounds, the interview was in English. Qualitative content analysis of the interview transcript was conducted by Davidjants. Video footage was prioritised as the primary data source,

with the focus group interview offering a complementary perspective on the categories identified in the footage, rather than dominating the analysis.

In addition to outsider observations, Dundua, a RoR Tallinn member, provided additional observational data and an insider's perspective based on her ethnographic research with the group. This insider perspective provided a valuable lens for understanding the embodied and communal dimensions of protest music. She subsequently applied qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes and to interpret participants' experiences, thereby supporting the integration of insider and outsider perspectives and enhancing reflexivity and methodological triangulation.

Through this analytical process, four interrelated dimensions were identified that structure RoR Tallinn's activism: (a) tactical frivolity as a vehicle for public messaging, (b) distributed leadership within the group, (c) care circulating across multiple relational layers, and (d) embodied experience at the individual level.

Discussion of Findings from Tallinn Pride

The analysis of video data revealed three major thematic categories of performance practices: (1) carnivalesque performativity with emphasis on tactical frivolity (targeted to the public), (2) distributed leadership (targeted to group members), and (3) care across multiple in-group layers (targeted both to the public and to group members). The ethnographic perspective also suggested a fourth category: embodied experience of performance (individual level). The following section will provide a more detailed explanation of each.

Carnivalesque performativity through tactical frivolity: movement and visuals

RoR Tallinn's use of tactical frivolity reflects a joyful life-affirming form of carnival protest that employs humour and peaceful non-compliance to challenge dominant power structures (Starr 2013). According to participants in the interview, the group was formed to bring energy to local Estonian protests, which were perceived as solemn and quiet, consisting of many speeches lamenting what was wrong or getting worse. In contrast, the RoR format offered an opportunity to keep the mood more upbeat and to amplify protest messages through beats and shouts. This aligns with the concept of carnival protest where activists move away from the rigid, often dull traditions of the past – the "march, chant, and listen" model (Hammond 2020: 270; Duncombe 2007: 22). By replacing solemn obligation with collective pleasure, RoR Tallinn lowers the barrier for entry and sustains engagement. The group's participation in selected demonstrations also aligns with this tactic. A notable example is the Goodwill Statement (*Heameeleavaldus*) demonstration in Tallinn Freedom Square. The event was organised by RoR Tallinn against the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (*EKRE*) during its stint in power (2019–2021) and designed not so much as a protest but rather as an expression of support – a way to show through positive energy how much happier society would be if queer people had more rights (FM: 20.06.2023).

Tactical frivolity was expressed at the 2023 Pride through the participants' appearance (clothing and accessories), actions (music and dance), and sounds (slogans and chosen rhythms that included samba and a well-known Estonian folk dance), making gender not a stable identity but continuously constituted over time through a stylised repetition of acts (Butler 1988: 519). Following this practice, the performers used makeup, costumes and movement as a means of communicating additional layers of meaning and enriching storytelling (Warwick 2023: 69). Like the spectators, members of RoR Tallinn were dressed in a variety of styles. Some wore casual streetwear and leisure clothing, while others had more elaborate costumes and accessories, such as fancy-dress hats, unicorn headbands, flower wreaths, or bold eye makeup. In addition to their instruments, each participant had a backpack, duffel or tote. The traditional rainbow and transgender flags were worn as cloaks.

This visual styling carried explicit political meaning, as face, hair, and body paint, rainbow shapes and colours, as well as attire and movement, added an additional messaging dimension to the drumming. Since the 2010s, blue – in addition to pink – hair dye has been associated with liberal political views and queer identities (Blue hair 2025). The appearance of coloured hair at Tallinn Pride 2023 further reinforced the tactical frivolous dimension. Several participants also incorporated pink and black elements or black leather items (skirts, coats, or jackets). The prominence of pink evokes the Pink & Silver street tactic introduced by British activists during anti-globalisation protests in Prague, where blocs dressed in glamorous pink and silver performed choreographed chants alongside samba bands. Within this tradition, having fun is treated as a measure of political effectiveness (Scholl 2012: 84–85, 92), an ethos that aligns with RoR's explicitly anti-capitalist orientation (Rhythms of Resistance no date).

Most of the members of RoR Tallinn wore some form of headgear (for example, baseball caps, beach hats or sunglasses), and a few individuals deliberately covered their faces, using masks with eye holes, sweatshirt hoods, or scarves tied in front of their faces. In Estonia's relatively safe policing environment, the use of masks is not intended as protection from the state. For some, during the Pride, this anonymity is an essential form of self-care, offering protection against potential social repercussions in personal life, such as strained family relationships or vulnerability in the workplace. At the same time, tactical frivolity was not an aspect unique to RoR Tallinn because most of the people present were engaging in some sort of performative behaviour. The main feature that set RoR members apart from the spectators was the presence of percussion instruments.

Tunes, dances, and slogans

Sonic metaphors – "being heard" or "having a voice" – are central to the politics of recognition (Weidman 2014). RoR enacted these in performance when instrumental tunes and spontaneous dance breaks alternated with shouted slogans, which were chosen through an inclusive process (FM: 20.06.2023). Some of these – such as "Everybody having fun!" and "Everybody dance!" – carried the vibes of inclusive positivity that the focus group interview also reflected. The tune "Cha Cha Cha", which was a Finnish Eurovision Song Contest entry of the same year by Käärijä, enhanced the prevailing atmosphere of enjoyment and positivity. These

moments worked as chant breaks: the shift from drumming to shouted slogans briefly expanded participation beyond the band, creating short bursts of shared voice that intensified collective energy. Another set of slogans of significance for the LGBTQ+ community referenced legendary historical events that started the Pride tradition in the West ("We will not be quiet, Stonewall was a riot!") as well as more general chants ("We're here, we're queer, we won't disappear!"). Some intersectional messages addressed both the LGBTQ+ community and anti-nationalist politics, blending old slogans with new ones ("No borders, no nations, trans liberation!").

At the beginning of the procession, the group cited the opening lyrics of the song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and repeated them when reaching the final stop. As its original performer, Judy Garland, is a widely recognised gay icon (Currid 2001: 123), this framed the performance in a symbolic manner, evoking the image of the rainbow as referenced in the lyrics (see Figure 1). However, due to the dynamic nature of the procession, this symbolism was only perceived by the participants themselves and by those accompanying them throughout the event. While most slogans were shouted in English, the Estonian *"Kõik erinevad, kõik võrdsed!"* ("All different, all equal!") was repeated the most – nearly forty times. This was also the motto of Tallinn Pride in 2007, marking the final year of the first wave of Prides in Estonia (3). In all, the group's continuous sonic presence functioned as sonic disobedience: it reorganised attention in public space and made the Pride message difficult to ignore even for casual bystanders (Ellman 2020).

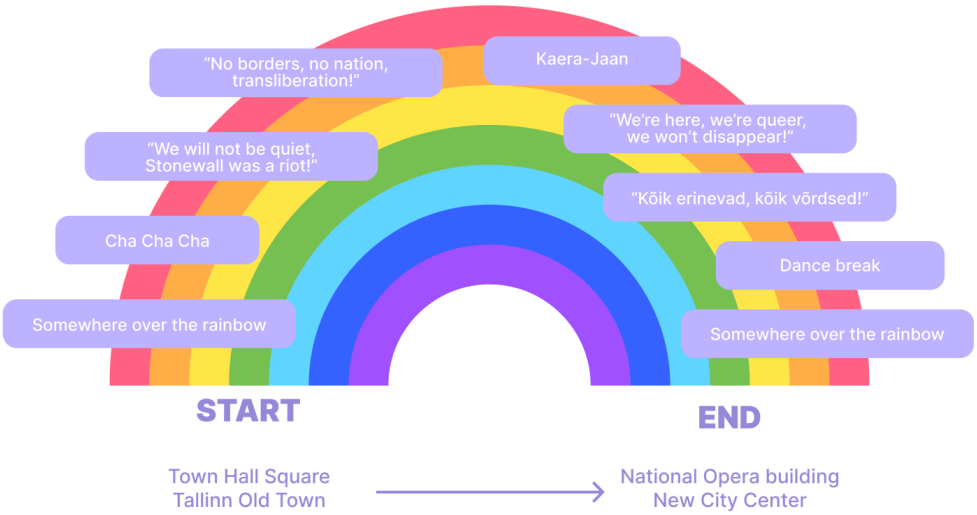

FIGURE 1. Visual representation of the most important slogans and tunes at the Tallinn Pride procession. Shouted slogans are presented in quotation marks, while tune titles are shown without them.

The politicisation of rhythms was less evident in performance but became clear during the focus group interview, where participants emphasised the risk of cultural appropriation – the unacknowledged use of elements of one culture by members of another (Cruz et al. 2023: no page). This reflected their internal awareness of

adopting Brazilian rhythms originating from oppressed communities. Many of the tunes were samba rhythms from the RoR sheetbook, including "Crazy Monkey", "Custard", "Nova Balanga", "Samba Reggae", "Sambasso", "Voodoo", and "Zurav Love". At the same time, Estonian local tradition was represented by a tune based on the popular folk-dance song "Kaera-Jaan" (4) which was added to the international RoR sheetbook in 2022 (Rhythms of Resistance no date). To acknowledge participants from Finland, the tune "Pekurinen" was performed, named in honor of the Finnish pacifist Arndt Juho Pekurinen (1905–1941), who opposed all forms of violence and refused to join the war (Rhythms of Resistance no date).

Distributed leadership: rotation of mestres and freedom of actions

As noted in Dundua's fieldwork material (2023), the group's non-hierarchical structures of care are maintained through regular rotation of participants performing the role of the *mestre* – the person who guides the group's musical performance using hand signals. The role of *mestre* operates through a set of reciprocal embodied relations rather than through formal authority. It requires heightened visibility, gestural precision, and spatial awareness, particularly since *mestre*s often march backwards, facing the band as they navigate the surrounding environment. This embodied orientation creates a two-way system of communication: while the *mestre* guides the group musically through hand signals, band members simultaneously develop and deploy their own gestures to alert the *mestre* to obstacles, uneven surfaces, or disruptions behind them.

The embodied logic also extends to the organisation of leadership. Since the position of *mestre* could be interpreted as similar to the role of a conductor of musical collectives (as person of power), freely rotating it among members is essential. During rehearsals and demonstrations, people are encouraged to assume *mestre* roles according to their comfort level. This decentralised approach demonstrates that leadership is not an instrument of control, but an act of collective care, grounded in mutual attentiveness, where the burden of responsibility is shared to sustain the group's emotional and musical resilience. From this perspective, leadership emerges within the vibrational field (Henriques 2010: 83): *mestre* roles circulate in response to collective affect and bodily momentum, and RoR's collective coordination grows out of shared affect and movement, grounded in embodied relations, rather than formal structures. However, equality comes with responsibility. Dundua reflects:

> Sometimes the whistle is passed around in a circle of players until someone decides to keep it and become a new mestre. […] For me and many of my group members mestreting has also been a position of significant pressure since it carries more responsibilities of making the group sound good. For this reason, people are always encouraged to do a small portion of mestreting according to their comfort level to ease new members into this position. Often, experienced mestres are guiding or creating mestreting workshops for inexperienced group members. (FM: 20.06.2023)

Seen through the feminist care ethic, this permissive leadership structure enables participants to experiment with responsibility and authority, creating conditions in

which horizontal power relations are practiced rather than merely asserted (Jeppesen 2019). This practice exemplifies one of the essential non-hierarchical principles of organising within RoR Tallinn. As articulated on the RoR website, bands operate on a decentralised, consensus-based model in which no one is "in charge", and *mestre*s at large events rotate fluidly, "swapping in and out as mood and movement take them". In this configuration, authority is neither fixed nor individualised but enacted through embodied coordination and shared responsibility (FM: Dundua 2023). Dundua's experience was confirmed in the group interview, where participants noted that there is never any pressure on anyone to become a *mestre*.

During the Pride procession, five different *mestre*s guided the group, and the last rotation took place after the filming had ended. Four *mestre*s participated in the warm-up circle, three of whom also led the procession. One *mestre* who led the procession had not taken part in the warm-up. The final circle was led by a *mestre* who had participated in the warm-up but had not led the procession. Considering that the whole event lasted about an hour, the number of people taking the lead role to demonstrate distributed leadership was significant.

Turino (2008: 29) argues that during participatory music and dance occasions, there is a subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – pressure to join in. However, our analysis offers an alternative view. Members of RoR were free to act as they saw fit during the procession. Some drummers temporarily stopped playing while marching in the procession to record the event with their mobile phones. During the final circle, one of the earlier *mestre*s initially did not participate, instead standing outside the circle and observing. The person decided to rejoin only several minutes later, retrieving a drum and moving through the centre of the circle to find a suitable position. No one seemed to mind this behaviour. This flexibility suggests that the value of the performance was grounded less in technical precision than in the quality and intensity of participation. This aligns with Turino's (2008: 33) distinction between participatory and presentational traditions, where success is measured less by some abstract assessment of the musical sound quality than by the intensity of participation.

Care Across Multiple In-group Layers and its Relation to Activism

An important aspect of RoR Tallinn's role is the creation of a safe space for people who share a similar worldview – including newcomers to the country – enabling them to collaborate in solidarity toward shared goals.

Shared musical activities such as drumming or listening can generate political "structures of feeling" that counteract fragmentation and suspicion (Hayes 2010 and Stirr 2017 in Sakakeeny 2024: 317). The quality of a performance is also gauged by how participants feel during the activity, rather than by how the music and dance might sound or look to an external observer.

The collective nature of shared music-making activities means a heightened focus on fellow participants. This is one reason why participatory music-dance contributes to the strong social bonding often associated with such practices (Turino 2008: 29). This heightened attention to others also creates the conditions for self-care to emerge – participants described rehearsals and performances as uplifting, confirming that the act of musicking contributed to their mental well-being (FM:

20.06.2023, Small 1998). Both aspects were also observed during our fieldwork in the Pride procession. During Pride, RoR Tallinn did not have a fixed headquarters, which meant that personal belongings had to be carried in backpacks, duffels or totes. Members remained constantly aware of one another, offering practical assistance such as helping *mestre*s carry their belongings or distributing sunscreen before the procession began. Many members also used earplugs to protect their hearing in the noisy procession environment. Reading through Tronto's (1993) care ethics, these practices show attentiveness (noticing another member's discomfort), responsibility (offering help), competence (using protective routines), and responsiveness (adjusting support when needed), making care part of what sustains participation. This sense of mutual and personal care was further confirmed in the interview, where participants noted that they supported each other through difficult moods and personal challenges. This was especially true given the anxiety they experienced – both musically (fear of "messing up" the tune) and socially (being part of a protest) (FM: 20.06.2023).

Because street protests are inherently risky, considerable effort is made to create a sense of safety among group members. One example of this support is the "buddy system", observed by Raju and also described by Dundua:

> We usually go to protests in pairs, and often the person with the smaller instrument is paired with the person with the larger one to help each other carry instruments in case we need to run. We also practice non-verbal communication to give each other signs of tiredness or insecurity, which would be addressed by the group. (FM: 20.06.2023)

These practices help maintain the energy needed to sustain the demonstration. Non-verbal communication also includes playful call-and-response moments, where some instruments play a "call" tune to which others respond. RoR members often launch into spontaneous dance breaks as well. Together, these shared practices – both verbal (chanting) and non-verbal (sounds, tunes or movement) – build trust, safety, and joy.

Care for the audience was evident before the procession began, when two groups of spectators positioned themselves beside the convoy and asked questions of the assistant *mestre* (5), who seemed happy to respond to both. Several people in the audience captured the event on camera while encouraging the participants. Additionally, casual bystanders who may not have been familiar with Pride chose to observe the event. It is worth noting that no hostile incidents targeting group members occurred during the Pride procession (6). The group readily allowed spectators to take photos and videos, displaying a positive and accommodating attitude. For example, when playing in the circle at the end of the procession, the assistant *mestre* helped create space for a camera tripod and positioned participants to achieve the best angles for the video. The interview also confirmed that one of the key motivations for RoR Tallinn participants was the direct positive impact on the listeners of the music they created.

Embodiment

Dundua emphasised the fourth category of performance: the embodied character of drumming during the demonstrations. In RoR, the physical impact of playing

shows – involving this type of activism – is not only voiced but felt, lived and carried in the body long after the demonstration ended. This embodied nature of drumming became apparent to Dundua during her first-ever Pride participation in Tallinn as a RoR Tallinn member. At this time, she was already involved with the group and had been attending weekly practice sessions for over two months. Although more experienced members warned her that carrying and playing drums leaves bruises on the body, and suggested using a thick shawl to cushion the spot where the drum rests on the legs, bruising still became an unavoidable part of drumming due to the constant movement while playing – especially since she had chosen to carry the low *surdo*, the largest and heaviest drum.

Since then, Dundua has taken part in many protests, playing different instruments, and has come to realise that bruising is often inevitable – even when carrying a smaller instrument like a snare. For her, the bruising became an important factor in acknowledging that the drum, strapped to her waist and resting on her legs, merged with her body and became its extension. Checking her bruises several days after the demonstration reminded her that she had participated in making the sound not only by beating the drum but through her entire skeletal frame:

> Quite literally I was banging on my own bones, making them sing on the tune. During the marching, as a participant, I also learned how to hold the drum to make it sound better or louder, how to position my body in relation to the drum, how to walk and support the drum with my legs, how and where to beat it and so on. This direct connection between my body and the instrument highlighted the embodied nature of the political performance I was involved in. (FM: Dundua 2023)

Thus, embodiment in RoR Tallinn is not a metaphorical attribute but a material condition through which political action is enacted. Embodiment therefore operates not simply as an expressive dimension of protest but as the mechanism through which collective agency becomes physically organised in public space. Political expression emerges through coordinated bodily endurance and rhythmic movement in public space, redistributing political agency through sound, movement, and shared physical presence, to those who might otherwise remain passive observers. In the street, the convergence of music, leadership, care, and political expression transform activism into a lived practice – a feat that the rehearsal space cannot replicate. While organisational principles and repertoires define the group's activist orientation, they gain true political force only through the physical presence and affective attunement in public space.

Discussion and Conclusion

In RoR Tallinn's performance at the Pride, music is transformed from a medium for fixed messages into a lived practice of collective action. The political value of the performance stems not from aesthetic outcomes, but from the intensity of shared responsibility and bodily coordination required to sustain the group's collective presence in public space. By enacting social relations through sound and movement, RoR's music-making functions as prefigurative politics, where the

desired social order is practiced rather than merely represented (Fians 2022). Operating across both prefigurative and pragmatic modes (Green and Street 2018), the band's embodied organisation enacts non-hierarchical sociality while its sonic presence simultaneously amplifies political messages. This dual orientation ensures that activism is not merely representational but a convergence of sound, movement, and organisation as a political action. RoR's explicit rejection of hierarchical leadership does not fully eliminate authority but redistributes it across the group, for example through the rotating *mestre* system that challenges conventional hierarchical models.

This study contributes to research on music and activism by demonstrating how care and embodiment enable political participation. Our analysis of RoR Tallinn's 2023 Pride performance identifies four interrelated dimensions: (1) tactical frivolity, (2) distributed leadership, (3) multi-layered care, and (4) embodied experience. These dimensions directly enact the group's activist goals: chant breaks and sonic disobedience amplify human rights messages, while synchronised actions and role rotation forge a collective identity. Simultaneously, mutual care and the celebratory nature of the performance foster emotional well-being. Together, these interwoven practices show how RoR Tallinn's activism transcends mere performance to build a resilient, supportive, and politically engaged community.

The qualitative case study findings suggest that tactical frivolity was manifest throughout the group's performance – through sound, movement, and visual elements. Their appearance, sound and movement, featuring human rights slogans alongside local and other cultures' rhythms, created an atmosphere that combined activism with joy. By adapting samba rhythms and Estonian folk music, RoR Tallinn's performance merged diverse cultural elements while consciously avoiding cultural appropriation. Although participants did not explicitly describe their involvement in the Pride procession as a performance, their actions resembled an artistic composition, carefully integrating international and local messages significant to the LGBTQ+ community.

RoR Tallinn's musical activism was not only outward-facing but also internally nurturing, reinforcing a sense of community and emotional resilience. Music played a crucial role in this, serving both as a political tool and a source of well-being. This care across multiple in-group layers – both directed to oneself and extended toward others in the group and beyond – was integral to their activism, aligning with a broader understanding of music as a means of fostering individual and collective well-being (Meneghini & Colledani 2024).

In conclusion, RoR Tallinn's performances at Tallinn Pride show how music can be a dynamic force for activism and emotional empowerment, making demonstrations livelier through organised sound. By blending political expression with performance, fostering multi-layered care, and cultivating an inclusive environment for both participants and spectators, the group exemplifies the use of musical activism to shape collective identity and bring attention to issues of social justice.

This study has the following limitations. The first relates to the fact that the empirical core of the data is drawn from a single event (Tallinn Pride procession 2023) – whose dynamic outdoor setting and large crowd interfered with observation and recording to a certain extent. The second limitation is the small size of the focus

group interviewed. This means that the results are specific to a particular event rather than providing an estimate of population parameters. We did not measure downstream impact – for example, the public opinions towards LGBTQ+ community before and after the Pride. Instead, our goal has been to provide detailed descriptions that explain various mechanisms – such as tactical frivolity, distributed leadership, care across multiple in-group layers and embodiment – that can, in principle, be transferred to other studies of activist drumming groups with similar structures and aims. Naturally, any eventual transferability will be conditional and depend on the contextual fit (for example, the movement's distributed leadership style, repertoire compatibility, and the cultural status of street protest) of the groups compared. Future research could address this through participation counts, media coverage analyses or audibility studies to examine how sound levels and rhythms affect visibility and resonance in public space.

Endnotes

(1) Reclaim the Streets (RTS) is a movement with a shared ideal of community ownership of public spaces. The movement started in 1995 in London and spread worldwide (including Estonia) a few years later. RTS peaked in the beginning of the 2000s but had basically ceased by 2019 (Reclaim the streets 2025).

(2) Reference to the Singing Revolution – a poetic euphemism for the series of national demonstrations between 1987 and 1991, at which collective singing was used as a method of peaceful protest.

(3) The tradition was discontinued due to rising violence and was only reinstated a decade later, as Davidjants recalls from her time doing advocacy work with the Estonian LGBT Association.

(4) After conducting research, the authors found that the song was inspired by a real person who lived in the 19th century. It was originally a satirical song about harassing women, which RoR members would likely not approve of. Over time, the part of the lyrics referring to unethical behaviour has been removed (Raid 2024).

(5) This term was coined by Raju while transcribing the video material. This individual walked alongside the group, mimicking all the mestre's movements and consistently performing this role throughout the entire event. In the focus group interview, it was explained that this person was chosen for their tall stature, which ensured they remained visible to everyone, regardless of their position in the procession.

(6) On the same evening, a violent incident occurred at an LGBTQ+ bar in the Old Town during a gathering of gay Christians, when an intruder attacked a pastor with a knife.

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Fieldwork materials

Footage and observation notes from Tallinn Pride, June 10, 2023.
FM – RoR members, focus group interview, June 20, 2023.

Ethnographic fieldwork materials from May 7 to October 7, 2023, using the methods of observation and participant observation. The fieldwork included:
- participation in weekly potlucks and rehearsals;
- engagement in the planning and performance of public demonstration (Baltic Pride) alongside RoR bands from multiple cities;
- participation in the collaborative planning and facilitation of a three-day self-organised RoR camp with members of the Tallinn and Tartu RoR bands.

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Back to the Future. The Music Production Imagination, Songwriting and Exploring the Past

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Abstract

The study of songwriting invites us to enter into the music production process of making a song. Here, we may observe melodic or lyric ideas in their unfinished form. However, within this process there are also ways a songwriter might imagine how the song will sound when it is completed. This article probes this process as the "music production imagination". Using a practice research approach coupled with brief textual analyses of existing accounts of practice, it examines the imagined futures of a song during the songwriting process. It draws on 1980s pop as an example, where highly mediated production elements, such as surreal reverb, synthesizers, and drum machines, often appear first in the imagination before they are realised in a recording.

KEYWORDS: music production, imagination, songwriting, popular music, 1980s pop music

Introduction

I stumbled upon a chord progression while playing my keyboard one day last year. It wasn't original in popular music or even in my catalogue, for that matter, but I liked the chord voicing I was using. It felt like the start of a new song. And so, it was. I then improvised a melody with my voice, and then a verse took shape. To anyone nearby – such as my partner in the other room or my neighbour who was gardening – they probably heard a ballad. Why? That's what I was playing, and that

was what I was recording into Logic Pro. But I was hearing other things. My mind was wandering beyond the music that was filling this space. I could imagine a mid to up-tempo pop song with 1980s pop production inflections. For example, I could hear in my head an electric guitar with a chorus effect, synths, and a big reverb on the snare drum. Over the next 20 minutes, I improvised chords, melodies, and nonsense lyrics until I had a sketch of a song. At this point, some decisions still needed to be made before I could release the song. Others had already been made, but they were not yet audible in the piano or vocal parts — they existed only in my imagination.

These decisions are emblematic of this stage of the music production process in pop music. Materially, there is a skeleton of a song. For example, "Every Breath You Take" by the Police, with many of the production inflections I envisioned, originates with a fragment of the song that lead singer Sting created. He states: "I woke up in the middle of the night with that line in my head, sat down at the piano and had written it in half an hour" (Davis & Smith 1993). This preceded the production elements of the song, such as instrumentation, arrangement, and processing, including the famous chorus effected electric guitar arpeggio. Another example is "Africa" by Toto. Singer and keyboardist David Paich discusses developing the melody and lyrics: "I was hearing the melody in my head and I sat down and played the music in about 10 minutes. And then the chorus came out. I sang the chorus out as you hear it" (Parker 2013). It precedes the famous Yamaha GS1 present in the completed recording. From these accounts, it is unclear how the production elements of the completed work were imagined, if at all. These accounts are focused on what they started with, materially, not imaginatively. Put differently, in these moments, if the songwriter, writing on the piano, wishes to consider these components as part of a specific outcome for the song, they may have to imagine them. Otherwise, all they, and musicologists as potential observers of this process, may hear is vocals and piano.

In this article, I consider the imagined futures of a song during the songwriting process. When scholars have analysed songwriting, they often confront a completed song and attempt to understand how it was made. However, as I argue, this may not enable us to encounter the imagined parts of a song in these moments, such as the long tail reverb that may linger between melodic phrases or the instrument parts that will provide a riff over the vocal hook in the chorus. I call this the *music production imagination*. To be clear, there are various ways in which a song might emerge. It might be collaboratively where various people feed into the songwriting process. In this instance, the persons who write the melody and lyrics might be building on a guitar riff such as the one in "(Can't Get No) Satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones, or it might be a studio-constructed backing track such as those created by Brian Eno for U2. But here, I am dealing with a case where the songs were written in a solo context, using accompanying instruments that probably won't feature prominently on the final recording.

I draw on songwriting influenced by 1980s pop music as a case study of this practice. 1980s pop, a genre highly mediated by studio technologies, provides a clear example of the music production imagination in songwriting. While these songs often share melodic and structural conventions common to popular music more broadly, they are associated with distinct digital production aesthetics such as expansive reverb, chorus effects, and synthesizers. As Goodwin (1988: 34)

observes, 1980s pop culture was characterised by a sense that "the future has now arrived, for good", reflecting the increasing prominence of new recording technologies in shaping musical aesthetics. Scholars have also noted the distinctive timbral qualities of this period; for example, Lavengood (2019: 88) argues that the brightness of the Yamaha DX7 and similar digital instruments differentiates 1980s sounds from the warmer timbres associated with earlier synthesizers. These characteristics make the decade particularly useful for examining how production aesthetics may be imagined during songwriting. In some cases, these sonic ideas may emerge during the songwriting process itself, particularly within studio-based songwriting where a producer might begin with a drum machine pattern and develop a melody, chords, and lyrics around it. In other cases, songs are written first and production elements are introduced later. Using a 1980s-focused case study, therefore, narrows the analytical field, allowing practice-led observations to be grounded in a coherent sonic vocabulary while illustrating a broader process within songwriting practice.

This article considers the songwriting process to explore how a practice research perspective may help develop a framework for popular musicology. Through listening to music, we may ask a series of questions and find answers stemming from what we can hear on the completed recording. We might ask different questions if we glean accounts of the creative process through interviews in the research design or through examining existing ones. The researcher can also be engaged in the creative practice through documentation. However, by structuring the research design around not just the documentation of creative practice but direct engagement in songwriting, we can encounter different and potentially more extensive insights into the creative process. This process may help us better understand the musicology of popular music, including the aesthetics and the cultural practices that lead to its development. Therefore, I endeavour to complicate our understanding of songwriting as a convergent practice with performance and recording. This indicates that studio-based songwriting may be more than technologically aided, but the studio production is also imagined during the songwriting process.

Defining the Music Production Imagination

Imagination provides a useful lens for exploring the songwriting process. The concept of imagination used here draws on existing scholarship that treats it as a theoretical tool for understanding cognition, culture, listening, and recording. Some scholars approach imagination as a cognitive process that plays a role in creative activity. Hargreaves (2012) and Jakubowski (2020), for example, describe imagination as central to the creation of texts and closely linked to broader discussions of creativity and musical thinking. Other approaches situate imagination within wider social and cultural contexts. Mills' (1959) concept of the sociological imagination encourages us to reconsider seemingly individual activities by placing them within broader social structures. As Mills argues, the sociological imagination is a "quality of mind" that allows individuals to connect personal experience with wider social processes. In this sense, imagination can expand our epistemological perspective, allowing songwriting to be understood not

only as an individual creative act but also as a practice shaped by wider cultural and technological contexts.

In music and sound studies, imagination has also been used to interpret the cultural and technological environments through which music is produced and experienced. Sterne's (2012) notion of sonic imaginations encourages scholars to consider sound within broader cultural frameworks. As Sterne (2012:5) writes, sonic imaginations are "plural, recursive, reflexive, driven to represent, refigure and redescribe" the sonic world. Related work has examined listening practices that cannot be directly observed. Valverde's (2022) concept of imagined listening recognises that listening must often be inferred through people's interactions with musical media and digital platforms. Imagination has also been applied to recording practices themselves. Negus (2010: 216) introduces the concept of the phonographic imagination to describe how recording technologies reshape musical creation by separating performances from their original contexts and relocating them within more private and mediated listening environments. These approaches suggest that imagination can be a productive way of examining musical practices that involve anticipating sonic outcomes beyond what is immediately audible.

Building on these perspectives, songwriting involves working with incomplete musical material – melodies, chords, and fragments of lyrics – while simultaneously anticipating how the finished recording might sound. This imagined future may include elements such as instrumentation, vocal processing, spatial effects, or production techniques that are not yet present in the songwriting sketch. In the context of this study, these anticipations often relate to production elements associated with 1980s pop, such as synthesizers and digital processing. These imagined outcomes do not always align with the final recording, as production decisions, collaboration, and studio experimentation may transform earlier ideas. This forward-looking dimension of songwriting is understood here as the *music production imagination* which describes the process through which songwriters anticipate the sonic outcome of a recording while working with unfinished musical material.

Delineating Songwriting and the Song

This study is situated within a research context that considers songwriting as a process that often operates fluidly alongside other elements of the creative process. Studying songwriting more broadly can involve examining how a song –typically a lead melody accompanied by lyrics and chords – emerges through creative activity. The emphasis here is on songwriting as a process rather than on the completed work, which is more often the focus of traditional popular musicological approaches (Moore 2012). If one wishes to understand how particular musical decisions are made – such as the development of melodic ideas or the establishment of tonal centres – it becomes necessary to examine the songwriting process itself. This approach has been examined from a range of perspectives. Some studies consider songwriting as a practice that can be taught through pedagogical approaches to craft (Tobias 2013; Kratus 2016). Kratus (2016), for instance, notes that when teachers work with student songwriters, the aim is to help students refine their own musical ideas rather than impose those of the teacher, framing

songwriting as an iterative creative process. Other work situates songwriting within broader systems of creativity and collaboration. Bennett (2011) highlights how collaborative songwriting emerges from both artistic and economic motivations, while McIntyre (2006) situates songwriting within a wider cultural system of musical knowledge and experience. His discussion of Paul McCartney's composition of "Yesterday", for example, illustrates how songwriting draws on accumulated musical practice rather than appearing as a fully formed idea.

More recent research has examined collaborative songwriting in industry contexts such as songwriting camps. Studies by Herbst (2024), Tolstad (2022) and Wernicke (2024) demonstrate how these camps function as structured environments where songwriters collaborate under time constraints, exchange skills, and negotiate creative roles while producing commercially oriented music. Other studies emphasise how songwriters anticipate audiences and musical trends. Hiltunen's (2023) ethnographic research, for instance, shows how professional songwriters engage in forms of "foresightfulness", and thus draw on their awareness of industry trends and potential musical futures when shaping songs.

This research context also highlights the fluid relationship between songwriting and music production. While songwriting often involves socially recognised tasks – such as developing melody, lyrics, and harmony – these activities frequently occur alongside the production processes of performance and recording. Zak (2001: 30), observes that many artists employ integrated methods in which songwriting, arranging, and recording occur simultaneously, a practice that has become increasingly common. Bennett (2011) similarly notes that contemporary studio environments enable the blurring of roles between songwriters, arrangers, performers and producers, with studio technologies themselves shaping creative decisions. Such perspectives challenge the assumption that melody, chords, lyrics, and arrangement are fully formed prior to recording (Zak 2001).

I propose that stepping inside the songwriting process allows us to consider moments when the song is not yet complete. Various elements – from sections to reverb – may still need to be added, removed, or reshaped. Existing studies demonstrate that songwriting unfolds through collaborative, cultural, and industrial processes. While work such as Hiltunen's shows how professional songwriters anticipate audiences and musical trends, these perspectives tend to frame this forward-looking activity in relation to industry expectations and possible musical futures. I suggest that songwriting also involves imagining the sound of the finished recording itself. The melody, chords, and lyrics produced by the songwriter may not fully encompass the vision of the completed work, which may exist primarily in the songwriter's mind rather than in a demo recording. How, then, do we make sense of these elements? How might we examine songwriting in a way that allows us to encounter this imagined future shaping the creative process?

Practicing the Imagination

The methodology of this research is underpinned by three approaches: textual analysis of songwriting practices from existing and prominent examples documented through media, making music in a music production context and documenting these experiences. These three approaches allow the study to

examine the music production imagination from complementary perspectives: through lived creative practice, reflective documentation of the songwriting process, and comparative analysis of documented production practices in popular music. The primary research materials, therefore, consist of DAW session files documenting the songwriting process, written reflective notes produced after each session, and a series of interviews, documentaries, and recorded artefacts analysed through textual analysis.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis in this article builds on existing studies that interpret documented accounts of how songs are written and produced. Research by McIntyre (2006), Katz (2010), and Moorefield (2005) demonstrates that examining interviews in magazines and documentaries can help illuminate processes of music creation. Although such texts present limitations – such as editorial framing, selective narration, and the motivations of interviewees (Williams) – they nevertheless provide valuable insights into creative practice. For example, accounts from The Beatles and Beach Boys illustrate how the 1960s marked a period in which the boundaries between songwriting and production became increasingly blurred, a development discussed by Katz and Moorefield. McIntyre's (2006: 215) analysis of Paul McCartney's reflections on "Yesterday" shows how songwriting emerges from a complex cultural and experiential process rather than spontaneous inspiration. This highlights how songwriting narratives can be interpreted through theoretical frameworks to reveal broader creative processes. Similarly, Long and Barber (2015) examine passion in songwriting, arguing that emotional investment plays a central role in shaping songwriters' careers. This body of research demonstrates how textual analysis can connect diverse practitioner accounts and reveal recurring themes in creative practice, while also acknowledging that many narratives are produced for general audiences and may lack detailed documentation of production processes.

This study employs textual analysis of materials relating to music production practice. These texts include artist discourse, mediated representations of studio work, and recorded artefacts. Artist discourse includes interviews and public statements in which musicians describe their songwriting and production processes. For example, interviews with Taylor Swift discussing the sonic direction of *1989* in *The Hit Formula* (2014) provide self-reported accounts of creative intention and production thinking and allow interpretation of how artists articulate aesthetic goals, including references to "80s synth-pop". Retrospective practitioner accounts are also considered, including interviews with David Paich about the development of "Africa", which reference the Yamaha CS-80 and GS-1 synthesizers and help document the relationship between songwriting and recording technologies in the 1980s. Industry publications and production journalism provide additional technical perspectives on recording sessions, such as interviews with producers working with Harry Styles, including comments by producer Tyler Johnson, which reveal instrumentation choices and studio decision-making. The study also draws on mediated observation of studio practices through documentary footage, such as *Miss Americana*, which depicts songwriting at the piano, collaboration with producers, and the addition of electronic drums and synthesizers

in Pro Tools sessions, providing observational insight into production workflows and enabling process tracing across stages of composition and recording. Finally, comparative listening is undertaken across recorded artefacts, including early demos and final studio recordings. For example, the home demo of "Billie Jean" (1981) is compared with the final recording on *Thriller* to analyse the persistence and transformation of instrumentation and arrangement, while songs such as "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (1983), illustrate how synthesizers, drum machines, and other production techniques associated with 1980s aesthetics were applied to pre-existing compositions.

Practice-led Production

The production context of this research is based on a practice-led approach, meaning the researcher composed music during the research process. This draws on my experience and practice as a songwriter, and the research data comes from the act of songwriting. Studies on songwriting and composition in popular music often focus on two different approaches. One is observation informed by a practical understanding of songwriting. For example, Tolstad (2023: 12) explores songwriting practices at camps, stating that their role was mainly to observe and listen from the studio corner. This highlights how songwriting can be experienced in the moment and narrated by participants. Another approach, one which inspires the method used in this paper, involves the researcher engaging in music making solo, as seen in Wolinski's examination of utopian thinking in songwriting. Wolinski notes (2017: 11). This method leverages the researcher's skills as a songwriter.

In this project, I performed the role of songwriter. This sits alongside my other skills as a musician (singer, guitarist and keyboardist) and producer/audio engineer. I have been making music since 2002, firstly in a bedroom context and then, since 2009, in a hybrid project/large studio approach (Goold 2022), primarily facilitated by my associations with tertiary music schools. The studio has been central to my songwriting practice for two decades. At the time of the commencement of this 1980s pop project, my studio setup consisted of a Universal Audio Apollo 8 audio interface, a MacBook Pro computer, and a U87 clone large diaphragm condenser microphone.

The project has two start dates. The first song was written in August 2021 without intending to be on a 1980s throwback album. However, the songwriting sessions, which were intentionally set out for a 1980s album, began in July 2022. I had, at this time, commenced work at a university that had a world-class large recording studio where I was to teach music production. I wanted to understand it better and explore some research questions simultaneously. Before this, though, I needed to write fourteen or so songs. This part of the project did not involve the large studio. That was to come, and I report on this in another article. The songs were written in my project studio, on voice, accompanied by piano or acoustic guitar. The song's melody, chords, and lyrics were developed over ten takes, sometimes shorter or longer. So, an initial melody or chord idea was expanded and developed into a new section. The last take was typically a finished version of a verse, pre-chorus, and chorus, and may not consider how the sections will be repeated in a typically pop song fashion. I recorded what I was writing into Logic. The instruments were recorded onto separate audio tracks. While working in a digital audio workstation

is a valuable research tool, it is also an effective songwriting device, as sometimes a melody can develop in an unsuccessful direction. Returning to some of the early iterations can help refocus the direction. I've done this for twenty years. The end result of this process was fourteen Logic files containing the process of the songs. Not all the songs were complete. While, for example, lyrics for the songs were finished, sometimes they didn't have a recorded take of the second verse with its lyrics.

My studio was normalised for songwriting, so there was minimal setup. This also meant the role of the studio in the songwriting session was scalable. While studio-based songwriting practices were used, the technology did not get in the way of the process. Signal paths for vocals, guitar and keyboard were already set. I had a template in Logic entitled "80s template", with a track with vocals, guitar, piano (whichever I used), then a couple of soft synths and drum machine tracks for easy access. The songs had a varying degree of studio use. Some songs were written with minimal studio tools, such as reverb, and 1980s-sounding Lexicon 480 L as a send effect. Some software instruments and loops were used to audition the 1980s aesthetic. DAWs such as Logic and third-party companies such as Arturia enable songwriters to access the sounds and functionality of famous 1980s hardware such as the LinnDrum or DX7. I reflect on these approaches in the next section.

The next stage was to prepare the songs to track the album. The songs were then to be tracked with drums (which I explored in another article). To accompany this, I recorded all the songs into one session to send bounces of each song to the drummer. The songs were recorded quickly over 90 minutes. Although some songs had studio instruments and piano in the writing process, they all returned to a consistent vocals and guitar sound. The production process analyzed here ends with the completion of 10 demo recordings made in my home studio. There was some processing, including compression, EQ, and reverb, but they were uniform across all tracks. The songs were titled: "By My Side", "Cone of Silence", "Fill my Cup", "Holding On", "Looking Glass", "The Morning Day", "Never That Easy", "Save A Little Time", "Where I'll Be", "Finally Arrived", "Lingers", "This Love", and "When Will It End".

Documenting the imagination

Research on songwriting, derived from the creative process, must have a methodology to document it. This research involves material elements, such as the documented process through a digital audio workstation. However, capturing documentation of an imagination, which doesn't manifest sonically, requires periodic written reflection. Jacobsen (2017) explores the interplay between ethnography and songwriting, while Carless (2018: 228) shares their songwriting process through reflective writing, stating, "Using a storytelling approach helps me respect the mystery and openness of the art". Although I summarise their approaches here rather than presenting entries, the thematic ideas suggest that the songwriting process can be productively translated into written form. During this research, I noted imagined futures for the song after each session. As a result, I captured my experiences with imagination during the songwriting process in notes. This was done as a written reflection at the end of each songwriting session. This approach presents challenges, as it's not something that I am familiar with in my

creative practice. Wolfe (2023: 27) reflects on their transition into practice research, expressing discomfort with intertwining personal experiences and studio inquiries. This resonates with my background in traditional research, where practical experiences often shaped broader research questions, serving as introductory rather than central elements.

The Music Production Imagination in Songwriting Practice

Accounts of contemporary songwriting practices provide a way of observing how the music production imagination may operate, even if only indirectly. Taylor Swift has, in recent years, adopted 1980s sounds in her music. This is particularly evident in her album 1989, but is more broadly present across her work after her pivot from country music. Swift recalls: "The sonic inspiration for this album really kind of harkens back to the sounds of late 80s pop" (Recording Academy / GRAMMYs 2014). It is possible to observe these sounds on the album. Swift notes: "With this album you'll hear like flickers and hints of 80s synth-pop in there" (Recording Academy / GRAMMYs 2014). The 1980s pop references on the album function as a vehicle for change. She says: "The goal is to continue to change, and never change in the same way twice" (THE HIT FORMULA 2014). The songs seem tailored to go in a new direction, which takes time, and her previous approach needs to change. She reflects: "Usually the things I write in the first six to eight months get thrown out not because they weren't great songs but because they don't fit my idea of what the new album should be" (Recording Academy / GRAMMYs 2014). These comments suggest that production aesthetics may already be imagined during the songwriting process, even when they are not yet materially present in the recording.

Swift incorporates electronic instruments into her songwriting process throughout her work. In the Netflix documentary *Miss Americana*, at 8 minutes, Swift states, "I'm only me", starting on piano to develop melody, chords, and lyrics. Later, in the studio, she and her producer add electronic drums using Pro Tools. At 52 minutes, she collaborates with producer Joel Little on "The Man", pausing to reference pre-recorded parts on her phone. She suggests, "Maybe if you start a vibe, then it'll just write itself", leading to the setup of a synth and additional keyboard tracks. Sloan (2021) argues that Swift's shift to 1980s pop sounds reflects both artistic experimentation and savvy rebranding. They note, "one can hear Swift thinking like a producer", as pre-composed music and in-studio experimentation help shape the final version of the song. This method exemplifies the music production imagination at work, integrating 1980s sounds into the songwriting process. Swift (Re-edition N.d.) begins with piano and vocals, incorporating studio technology later, aligning with her belief that "I can't write a song without a melody". In tracks like "The Man", technology enriches the production and defines the song's potential beyond the initial piano version. In this way, mediated accounts such as interviews and documentaries provide partial insights into how production thinking may shape songwriting.

Similar indications of a music production imagination appear in other contemporary songwriting accounts. Harry Styles' approach to engaging with 1980s aesthetics integrates instruments from the period. Tyler Johnson (cited in Rogerson 2023) notes: "Harry was sitting on the Moog One, and I liked what he

was playing, so I sat down and played as he started to write the melodies and the lyrics". Also, Harry's approach shows that some of the 1980s elements present in the songwriting stage might be replaced later. The programmed drums that helped develop the song were replaced at one point on this album. Johnson (cited in Willman 2022) states:

> Hull [producer]loved the drum part he'd come up with on the spot, but found the actual sound of it lacking. So he re-recorded each element of the drum kit, one at a time. They also brought in a second drummer, Mitch Rowland, who plays guitar on the album as well, for a slightly thrashier sound toward the end of the single.

This approach reveals that the technology used in the songwriting process can be frustrating, thus reflecting my experience with drum loops in Logic Pro X. These examples suggest that imagined production elements can influence songwriting decisions even when the final sounds are not yet fixed.

The mediated nature of these accounts presents incomplete insights into the creative process. In *Miss Americana*, the portrayal of one song emphasises the progression to a concert rather than the decision-making involved. The 40-minute section on "Get Away Car" shows Swift and her producer Jack Antonoff developing the melody and lyrics, followed by a Pro Tools session with layered tracks. The transition to a concert performance happens quickly, limiting our understanding of her initial vision and the studio's role in shaping the final sound. This highlights the limitations of relying solely on mediated accounts of songwriting. While they provide useful glimpses of production thinking, they often obscure the moment-to-moment decision-making through which such ideas emerge.

Historical recordings and demos offer another form of textual evidence through which the music production imagination can be examined. 1980s aesthetics and these songs can be intertwined and observed in the Michael Jackson song "Billie Jean". "Billie Jean" was released in 1983 as a single and a track on Jackson's second solo album, *Thriller*. The song was written by Jackson and co-produced by Quincy Jones. In 2001, a special edition release of *Thriller* included a revealing recording of "Billie Jean" titled "Billie Jean Home Demo" (1981). Jackson created the demo for "Billie Jean" at home two years before its public release. It features various 1980s instruments, including a drum machine, synth bass, Rhodes keyboard, electric guitar, and Jackson's voice. While the instrument parts carry over to the final track with improved performances and recording quality, the vocals and lyrics are still in progress. The chorus is well-developed with overdubs and melody, but the verses remain incomplete, indicating that the 1980s instruments and tech processing play a role in shaping the song's production. In this case, the demo suggests that production technologies were already shaping the song's imagined sonic form during its early development.

However, not all examples suggest that production aesthetics are present at the earliest stages of songwriting. This is indicative of the two examples that I referred to in the Introduction with "Africa". The song and its famous arrangements were developed after David Paich wrote the melody and lyrics. Robyn Flans (2005) writes, "Paich then proceeded to work on the lyrics for another six months. He brought the skeleton to drummer Jeff Porcaro with the idea of having percussion

being an integral part of the composition". It was at this point that he then turned to the 1980s sounds. In another interview (in Parker 2013), he states,

> I realised I had a song in the making, so I started writing on the Yamaha CS-80, which you hear in the intro - that's the keyboard playing - and then you hear the little kalimba sounds [on the Yamaha GS1] in the chorus. It was a fertile time to make music with new sounds, and that kind of defined that song.

These elements indeed defined the song, framing its distinctive introduction section and the following instrumental parts. If they were there in any form in the early stages of the songwriting process, it would be the music production imagination of Paich. In such cases, the production aesthetic emerges after the song's core musical material has already been established.

The technological reference points that can prompt an imagination did not always exist when some of the most well-known 1980s songs were written. Not all songs from the 1980s were written during that decade. Several famous songs from the 1980s were covers of songs written before the 1980s (1). Examples include "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (1983) by Cyndi Lauper and "Bette Davis Eyes" (1981) by Kim Carnes. These songs underwent significant changes compared to the originals. The heavy use of synthesizers and gated snares are examples of such changes. The original version of "Tainted Love" had more acoustic instruments, such as a Rhodes keyboard, which was later replaced by various synths in the Soft Cell version. Synths and drum machines replaced the original bass and drums. Additionally, the reverb used in the Soft Cell version has higher frequencies consistent with the 1980s Lexicon 481. Even "Bette Davis Eyes" was originally a swing pop jazz piece transformed into a straight groove for the 1980s. These examples illustrate that 1980s songs do not necessarily have a particular aesthetic because they were imagined as such during the songwriting process. The temporal distance between the origins of some of these songs and their release renders such an imagination impossible. Instead, they were applied to a completed song, like adding colour paint to a pencil sketch. These examples underscore the importance of conceptualising songwriting as a process. While textual sources allow us to infer how production aesthetics may intersect with composition, they rarely provide direct access to the imaginative decisions that occur during songwriting itself. The following section, therefore, turns to a practice-led approach in order to examine these moments more closely.

Technology, the Mind, and Imagination in Songwriting

Stepping into the songwriting process and documenting the experience of imagining how the song might progress provides a productive lens to understand the music production imagination. The creative process, here, can be understood as a temporal sequence of events, but the anticipation of what comes next or how the song might progress into a finished work took on different forms.

For some songs, I primarily imagined their progression in my mind. Put differently, they were internally auditioned. While I developed these songs with vocals and either acoustic guitar or piano, there were elements that extended

beyond the audible output of the session. For example, when I was writing "By My Side", a mid-tempo 1980s-style pop song, I initially wrote the chorus on acoustic guitar and voice. While developing the section, I could imagine a synth counter-melody accompanying the vocal line. This first appeared as I developed the chords that moved between ii and iv. I imagined a coarse, sawtooth-like synth timbre playing a short run centred on scale degree III. Here, as the vocal melody developed, I anticipated a counter melody that would be important to the song's functioning. Further, as I experimented with ways to resolve the chorus, which was otherwise building harmonic tension, I anticipated a second synth line responding to the vocal melody and creating a deceptive cadence. This expectation shaped the melody's phrasing, leading me to leave space between lines so the imagined response could occur. Later, while writing the bridge section, I changed my strumming approach to focus on chord changes to create a sense of textural openness. I imagined this space later being filled by an electric piano sound akin to the E. Piano on the DX7. At the same time, I anticipated the sixteen-bar bridge building toward a climactic moment in which the drums would introduce large tom hits framing the section. This expectation even shaped the lyric, prompting me to develop the line "can you hear the sound of drumming". Although the guitar and vocal performance defined the immediate sonic material of the session, the compositional thinking was oriented toward a fuller arrangement. I imagined certain sections becoming densely layered while others would be stripped back, reflecting common dynamic contrasts in 1980s pop production, including reverberant toms and synthesizer textures that were not yet materially present in the session. This approach was also used in "Where I'll Be", a similar, uplifting pop song.

Another approach involved using recording technology as a stakeholder to augment the imagined future of a song. A constant element throughout the creative process was the use of a Lexicon 480L reverb plugin. Digital reverbs produced by Lexicon, particularly the 224 and later the 480L, became closely linked with the expansive spatial aesthetic of 1980s pop production, and creating a surreal reverb sound in pop music. I applied it to the vocal track as a send for playback and on the UAD Console during tracking, meaning it was not being recorded. This reverb was heard both in playback and during tracking. It prompted me to imagine how the reverb might decay and how to leave space for it in the melodies I was writing. During the songwriting stage, I could experience a spatial aesthetic that would align somewhat with the final recording. The 480L was set to a male plate preset with a long decay and an unnatural amount of high frequencies, consistent with 1980s aesthetics. I found it particularly useful when writing the song "Cone of Silence", a 1980s ballad similar to "Heaven" by Bryan Adams. While I regularly use reverb during my songwriting practice, it is mainly to provide some depth, but not to this extent. In this context, I noticed that the reverb tail inspired me to sing in my upper register and let notes ring out longer to maximise the effect of the reverb. This reverb was a placeholder, and I anticipated that it would be refined later, as it was only for monitoring and not captured in the session, although the Logic session itself was running another 480L as a send.

Similarly, the sound of 1980s pop was produced by placeholder software synths and drum machines during the songwriting process. This meant that at some point before the core melodic parts of the song were completed or chords were finalised,

various 1980s elements were added. These elements included 1980s synths like the DX7 and the drum machine like the LinnDrum. These instruments provided some insight into the 1980s sound that might be present in the completed recording. An example of this is the song "A Lonely Night". There weren't many lyrics beyond nonsensical words when I developed a verse and chorus melody and chord arrangement. It had a swung 1950s feel and an ice cream turnaround (I vi IV V) progression, and I was unsure how this would fit into an 1980s pop arrangement. I arranged it with three synthesizers and a drum loop to counter this. These 1980s cues illuminated my imagination of how the song might work in a 1980s throwback context despite its 1950s underpinnings. Crucially, these 1980s elements were embedded in the track before the melody and lyrics had been developed. In fact, very few of the final lyrics were present when the synthesizers and drums were well established. However, the use of 1980s sonic elements revealed some limitations. As my primary concern was developing the melody chords and lyrics, the drum machine and keyboard synth parts were established quickly. There was no chance of them making it to the completed recording. Consequently, they weren't fully formed or with extensive consideration. The embedded nature of the LinnDrum and DX7 into Logic enabled quick access to these sounds, but I was struck by how, without time or focus on refining the sound and parts, the success of imagining a 1980s pop sound was limited. This process also revealed that the sound I was looking for was not always the robotic groove created by the LinnDrum. I often wanted real drums. The tools in Logic were unable to help imagine this. They were, in fact, counterproductive. Nonetheless, it spurred my imagination that synths – if chosen more carefully – would successfully place this song in a 1980s context.

There were moments in the songwriting process when the imagination, whether technologically mediated or not, failed to project a 1980s pop aesthetic vividly even though the song – in terms of its chords, melody and lyrics, was approaching its completion. On those occasions, I shifted from an acoustic songwriting context to building a rough demo, expanding the guitar and vocal ensemble to include drums, bass, other guitars, backing vocals, and synths to explore the arrangement more concretely. This happened while writing *The Looking Glass*. I remember sitting in the studio, unsure how the song might produce a 1980s sound. The acoustic guitar and vocal sketch were working musically, but the production aesthetic remained unclear. To explore this further, I began constructing a demo in Logic, starting with the "Logic Drummer", a virtual drummer designed to approximate human playing styles. I selected the *Floor to the Floor Kit* with an *Indie Disco Acoustic Drummer* setting, which produced a straight beat with the kick on every beat and the snare on beats two and four. I added substantial gated reverb to the snare to recall the spatial qualities associated with 1980s pop recordings. I also began layering vocal overdubs in the chorus, experimenting with backing vocal textures and doubling techniques. This process allowed several aspects of the arrangement to emerge, particularly the song's groove and the density of the chorus. I also spent time spatialising parts and applying processing such as compression and EQ. In the chorus, I layered additional piano and backing vocals, gradually building a fuller arrangement around the original guitar-and-vocal sketch. The disadvantage of this approach was the time required and the limitations of the virtual synths and drum instruments. At the same time, I knew that once the live drums were tracked, these programmed elements would likely become latent in the final recording.

Nevertheless, the demo gave me confidence that the song could function within a 1980s production aesthetic. In particular, I was aiming to capture something of the sonic attitude found in "I Won't Back Down" by Tom Petty.

The results of the approaches taken produced a diverse range of recordings, ranging from acoustic guitar and vocals. Some had extensively fleshed-out demo recordings that were processed and mixed, and others that were ready to record but did not have a completed version (there might have been incomplete lyrics in the last recording that took place in the songwriting session). The next phase of the project was to follow the tracking of the drums – this itself being its own research project. I did not want to send the drummer and research collaborator incomplete lyrics and songs with a structure that had not been recorded. Further, I did not like sending them demos when I was unhappy with the groove. This was because I didn't want the drum machines to influence the real drums that would be used. I wanted to work with the drummer in a collaborative manner. This was the primary reason for recording the 14 songs for the session.

This process is indicative of how songwriting in a wide variety of contexts can be studio-based. Even though the use of technology differed across these spaces, all these instances shaped the songwriting. And aligns with the idea that recording and composing are indeed aligned. This might be because the recording is imagined, or is put in with stakeholders, to help shape the melody, or later to help confirm that the song is right and then prompt minor adjustments, but it's all indicative of a fluid process between the song and its recording environment and can appear in a contemporary production context.

Conclusions

This article has explored how the creative process of music production is devoid of the text we are often most familiar with: the completed recording. For the songwriter, if they are mindful of the completed recording, they must imagine it. First, this imagination may take shape in the songwriter's mind as they compose the melody of a specific section; they may imagine the instruments that will play beyond the one they are playing to compose. They may imagine how the instruments provide parts around the melody or concurrently. They may imagine the processing that will occur using studio technology. Second, this imagination also takes shape within the affordances of studio technology in contemporary music production contexts. As the songwriter composes, they may add a drum loop. They may add another vocal part to the main one they are composing. They may process the sound of their vocals as they write. While these are very different forms of the music production imagination, they exist as multiple-layer spectrums and flow fluidly in individual production situations.

The music production imagination speaks to the layers of meaning propagating when we encounter text. It may relate to the creative process more broadly. Clark et al. (2003: 773) state, "When people tell stories, and when they listen to them, they think about what is going on in the worlds being described". This suggests that when we both produce and encounter cultural texts, there are layers behind the information we are either producing or being presented with. There is curiosity. And the music production imagination reminds us of this. The music production

imagination is about creating a melody – or some fragment of a new song idea – and thinking about what might come from it or how it might fit into a specific genre. Similarly, Klempe (2017) argues that music prompts vivid imagery in the listener. Likewise, music encounters can initiate a series of reference points in the creative process. Yet, I am interested in how this cultural practice plays out in texts. This imagery can be documented through a practice research approach and then contextualised more broadly within popular music practice through accounts of process in the media articles.

A music production imagination framework for songwriting may provide fertile ground for future research. The processual consideration in songwriting study may involve not only the order in which elements materially emerged in the process. It may also consider the imagined futures that are present during this process. As just one part of making a 1980s album, this article prompts questions about how the music production imagination plays out in the tracking stage in a collaborative context or how this imagination is realised when the songs are produced and the album is completed. But beyond this, the music production imagination might help us understand production in a context embedded in the past or a style of popular music with less technological mediation. It provides another lens through which we may contemplate the music production process. Imagination here is twofold—the process by which musicians consider where their music might go and how music production scholars attain insights into these considerations.

Endnotes

(1) Several internet blogs, such as Saturday Evening Post Brownfield 2022) and Popmatters (Gerard 2020), report on famous 1980s songs that were covers.

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The Intellect Handbook of Popular Music Methodologies

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The Intellect Handbook of Popular Music Methodologies is an ambitious and welcome addition to the expanding landscape of popular music studies. Spanning more than 700 pages, the volume surveys scholarly practices ranging from ethnography and discourse analysis to artistic and practice-based research, digital approaches, posthuman musicology, and critical engagements with technology and mediation. Its breadth is a considerable achievement, and the handbook addresses researchers at multiple stages of their careers by offering an overview of established approaches and entry points into the field.

What distinguishes this volume from other handbooks, however, is the conceptual promise articulated in its title and Introduction. As the editors emphasise, the book is not intended as a mere collection of "methods", but as an exploration of "methodologies": the focus is "not only on what methods we and our peers are using (…) but on the rationales for, affordances of, and challenges and opportunities inherent in" the approaches through which scholars seek to understand, explain, and do popular music (1). Taking this framing seriously, the distinction between "method" and "methodology" becomes crucial. While a method concerns how research is conducted, methodology raises more fundamental questions about the grounds, assumptions, and implications of

scholarly practice. Evaluated against this methodological horizon, the handbook oscillates between sustained methodological reflection and a survey of recent research practices.

This ambiguity is particularly visible in a chapter devoted to Chinese popular music. The author applies ethnography alongside textual and visual analysis—approaches well established within popular music studies. What is largely absent, however, is methodological reflection in the stronger sense proposed by the editors themselves. The chapter demonstrates how these methods are used, but not why they are chosen, what they disclose about music, or what they necessarily leave unexamined. This limitation is already evident in the chapter's framing, which invokes Sarah Cohen's critique of the marginality of ethnography (Cohen 1993) as a justification for the research orientation. More than three decades later, such a claim is difficult to sustain, particularly in a volume that devotes an entire section to ethnographic research and relies heavily on ethnographic methods elsewhere. In this context, the appeal to ethnography functions less as a methodological argument than as rhetorical legitimation.

A similar simplification characterises the chapter's engagement with theory. Tia DeNora's work is reduced to the claim that "meanings are established by listeners via their use of music rather than by music itself" (374), flattening her relational argument into a crude opposition between music and reception. A brief appeal to the continued relevance of musicological analysis follows, producing a conciliatory synthesis that ultimately drains the debate of its methodological force. The issue is not the legitimacy of attending to listening practices or meaning-making processes, but the absence of reflection on how such empirical emphases shape what can be known about music, and how musical organisation itself might enter into the analysis beyond discourse and practice description. In this respect, the chapter exemplifies a broader tendency within the volume: methods are applied competently, but their epistemic assumptions, limits, and stakes remain largely implicit.

A comparable pattern can be observed in the chapter on Krishnacore by one of the editors. The contribution offers a well-contextualised account of the ideological, religious, and socio-political discourses that shape the scene, situating Krishnacore convincingly within broader debates around identity, belief, and resistance. As an analysis of discourse and self-representation, it is informative and persuasive. Yet once again, the methodological emphasis falls overwhelmingly on language, narrative, and testimony, while the musical dimension itself remains largely underexamined. This imbalance becomes evident when the author cites an interviewee who describes "the means in which he narrates his experiences through the musical text" (584). Here, "musical text" refers less to organised sound or musical structure than to a vehicle for narrative expression, diverging from its usage elsewhere in the volume, where it denotes sonic, formal, or material properties. The issue is not merely terminological, but methodological: music is treated primarily as a discursive surface rather than as a constitutive medium of meaning. The relative absence of sonic or structural analysis is not framed as a methodological choice with specific affordances and limits, but is instead taken for granted, reproducing a familiar tendency to interpret musical cultures chiefly through what musicians

simply say about their work rather than through how musical organisation itself generates meaning, affect, and social force.

The final section of the volume, devoted to "emerging methodologies", brings these issues into especially sharp relief by foregrounding approaches—such as ecomusicology and Animal-Oriented Music Criticism—that directly challenge the anthropocentric assumptions underpinning much existing research. These posthuman perspectives do not merely extend the methodological landscape; they call into question the very foundations on which earlier claims to methodological renewal within the volume rest.

Against this methodological backdrop, one chapter framed as proposing "methods for the twenty-first century" reveals a significant tension. The chapter advances artistic research as a way of overcoming a perceived dichotomy between intuition and logos through the notion of "musical reasoning" (39). Yet this proposal remains firmly grounded in human cognition, creativity, and experience, precisely the human-centred orientation that the final section implicitly seeks to unsettle. Moreover, the chapter legitimises its methodological novelty by construing earlier research as excessively logocentric—treating logos as synonymous with linguistic or rational domination—and opposing language and reason to intuition in a manner that simplifies both. In doing so, it overlooks logos as a practice of disclosure and ignores its status as a derivative mode of disclosure that presupposes originary forms of intuitive access.

What is at stake here is not a disagreement between chapters, but an unresolved methodological problem internal to the volume itself. The posthuman interventions in the final section implicitly destabilise the framing through which artistic research is presented as methodologically progressive, yet this destabilisation is neither acknowledged nor reflected upon. It is precisely such tensions—between what a method presupposes, reveals, and excludes—that methodology ought to bring into view. In this sense, *methodo-logia* would name not the accumulation of techniques, but the critical task of reflecting on the conditions under which particular approaches disclose certain aspects of music while concealing others. From this perspective, the handbook does not fully realise the conceptual space opened by its plural title, since the notion of "methodologies", invoked so ambitiously in the Introduction, remains unevenly theorised across the volume. Nevertheless, by exposing the limits of how methodology is currently understood and practised, the book compels readers to confront a larger, unresolved question: what it might mean to take methodology seriously as a reflection on the purposes and responsibilities of popular music research today.

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Futuromania: Electronic Dreams, Desiring Machines and Tomorrow's Music Today

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In his latest collection of essays, *Futuromania*, Simon Reynolds picks up where his 2011 *Retromania* had left off. Where *Retromania* saw Reynolds tracing a lineage of (mostly rock) musics which looked to the past as fodder for a very uncreative and under-stimulating present, *Futuromania* charts a history of musics that have sounded, and still sound, future oriented. *Retromania* was in effect built on the premise that early twenty-first-century music suffered from a lack of creative inspiration and an incapacity to evolve into novel forms and genres. *Futuromania* advances no comparable overarching claim: it leaves open the question of what future-looking music might, in practice, sound like, instead offering us a glimpse into the ways in which developments in sound technology shape not only music but equally also the cultural imaginary that accrues around it.

The text is a collection of largely chronological writings on different and interlocking developments in electronic music. Some pieces are fully developed essays that provide detailed historical overviews, such as Reynolds's examination of British synth-pop in "Electronic Dreamers". Others take the form of curated lists highlighting records that have influenced forward-thinking genres, such as his exploration of UK Grime in "GRIME: We Run the Road". Still other essays focus on the work of individual artists, such as the analysis of Jlin's music in "FOOTWORK: Jlin's Martial Artform". The result is a diverse set of texts

united by a common, yet subtle, thread: the ways in which innovations in sound technology, when fused with the singular creative visions of artists, have the power to spark movements, countercultures, and subcultures that are nothing short of world changing.

The roots of Reynolds's obsession with the future are by now well documented. His strong affinity for rave culture reflects a devotion to a scene built (or at least remembered as being built) on the promise of liberation through dance, the collective energy of crowds, as well as the hypnotic surrender to the intricate and machinic rhythms of techno, jungle, and acid house. It is fitting, then, that *Futuromania*'s Afterword would reckon with the origins of Reynolds's passion for rave, which boils down to an admixture between his fascination with Deleuze and Guattari (after all, part of the book's title references "desiring machines") and his enthusiasm for the utopian potential of MDMA. Naturally, within the context of his writings on eighties and nineties electronic music collected in this book, the influence of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) looms large; Kodwo Eshun—a writer, theorist, and filmmaker best known for his influential (and at times controversial) postmodern and posthumanism-inspired music journalism, *More Brilliant than the Sun* (1998), developed during his tenure with the CCRU—is even explicitly cited. At that point, Reynolds's posthumanist-inflected critique becomes easy to read as symptomatic of a broader *fin-de-siècle* narrative about the capacities of machines to redirect desires—one that, in retrospect, may have overestimated the transcendental power of technology.

But *Futuromania* is less a book about futuristic music than it is about coming to terms with the fact that there have been times when the future seemed to hold far greater liberatory potential than it does today. For Reynolds, the 1990s clearly represented one such moment; the 2020s, judging by his relatively sparse writings on the present, appear decidedly bleaker. In this regard, the book can be divided into three broad sections which reflect Reynolds's own feelings about musical developments. The first, spanning the 1970s and 1980s, focuses primarily on the evolution of synthesizers and the synth-driven music that emerged alongside them. Here, the author's most compelling contribution lies in his balancing of the dominant Anglophone canon with equally significant, yet often overlooked, developments from other regions: he draws attention to, among others, Japan's Yellow Magic Orchestra which, often omitted from mainstream synth music histories, has nevertheless played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of electronic dance music, even influencing Detroit's legendary techno outfit Cybotron (Reynolds 2024: 52).

The second section, spanning the 1990s to the 2000s, explores the rise of electronic dance music and the cultural impact of electronic instruments. Here, Reynolds's enthusiasm is at its most infectious, reflecting his personal investment in the era. The third section on the other hand, covering the early 2000s to the present, takes a more fragmented approach, weaving together a range of loosely connected electronic acts that appear future facing yet are not tied to any singular advancement in sound technology. This is not to say that technological developments are absent, but rather that no overarching narrative emerges. One notable exception is Reynolds's essay on Auto-Tune, "THE LIFE OF AUTOTUNE: How Pitch-Correction Revolutionised Twenty-First Century Pop, from Afrobeats to Atlanta Trap", which touches upon long-standing debates in popular music studies—chief among them, the contested notion that authenticity lies in an absence of technological mediation. Instead of framing Auto-Tune as a tool for masking artistic inadequacy, Reynolds of course takes a

nuanced approach to the topic: he argues that, like earlier innovations such as the microphone, the tool does not conceal imperfections so much as redefine the creative possibilities of the human voice.

However, if contemporary music can be understood, as Reynolds suggests, through the interplay between different and often fragmented acts and movements, it is just as important to consider what has been left out of his narrative. Two major omissions stand out. First, Reynolds devotes little space to women's contributions to electronic music beyond a few well-established figures like Wendy Carlos, Bebe Barron, and Delia Derbyshire. Even in the one chapter dedicated to contemporary female artists, Reynolds acknowledges his analytical limitations, grouping together musicians with little in common. More perceptual acuity in categorising and making sense of this otherwise disparate set of acts would have been salutary here.

Likewise, Reynolds engages only minimally with the rapid evolution of internet-driven music scenes, leaving readers to piece together the significance of genres like hyperpop and SoundCloud rap to today's musical landscape. This oversight may stem from his lingering retromantic tendency to idealise the 1990s as a golden era of innovation. In this sense, while Reynolds does acknowledge some recent trends, those looking for a more thorough engagement with the forward-thinking corners of electronic music today may find his treatment forbiddingly cursory.

Despite these challenges, in *Futuromania* just as much as in his past works, Reynolds excels at demonstrating how music journalism may complement and expand the work of musicology—perhaps more so than in other humanistic disciplines. His impact on properly scholarly efforts to understand the interplay between technological advancements and the development of electronic music scenes is undeniable. Equally undeniable is his dedication to uncovering even the most fleeting artistic currents, using them as entry points to reveal deeper truths about the cultural and historical trends shaping past, present, and future eras.

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A Mediatized and Decentered Future: Popular Music Studies at IASPM 2025

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Abstract

The 23rd IASPM Biennial Conference (Paris, 2025), themed "Recording Popular Music", directed scholarly attention from external social crises toward a renewed focus on the medium of recording itself. This review identifies three key intellectual currents evident at the conference: an ontological turn that redefined recording as music's mode of existence; a technological-historical turn that reframed sound technologies as cultural artifacts; and a continued engagement with identity politics, now turned inward to examine recording as a site of gendered power and decolonial contestation. Together, these shifts established recording as a central object of theory and method. The conference also signaled a move toward a more mediatized and polycentric future for the discipline, exemplified by the growing participation of scholars from beyond the Anglo-American sphere.

KEYWORDS: IASPM, Popular Music Studies, Conference Review, Recording, Global South

The 23rd biennial conference of the IASPM, held at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris from 7–11 July 2025, served as a pivotal forum for critical reflection within the discipline. Whereas the 2023 meeting in Minneapolis, themed "Popular Music in Crisis", examined music's response to social and epidemiological upheavals, the Paris conference turned inward under the banner "Recording Popular Music". This thematic focus invited a move from addressing external crises toward reflecting on the very medium that constitutes popular music itself—the recording.

The choice of Paris carried both symbolic and historical resonance. As one of the few cities to host IASPM conferences more than once (the first in 1989), it provided a site for critical self-reflection on how the field has evolved over three

decades. France's long-standing traditions in sound studies and the aesthetics of acoustics also made it a fitting venue for a gathering centered on recording, materiality, and the mediated nature of musical experience.

Overall, the conference foregrounded an emerging "media turn" in popular music studies—a perspective that repositions recording as a key site where sound, technology, and culture converge, demanding a renewed ontological reflection on music's existence in the age of digital mediation.

This article reviews IASPM 2025 by analyzing its three key intellectual currents—the ontological, technological-historical, and identity-political—and concludes by assessing how these conversations point toward an increasingly mediatized and decentered future for the field.

The Ontological Turn: Recording as a Mode of Existence

One of the most prominent intellectual realignments evident at IASPM 2025 was a sustained move away from an implicit "liveness-centrism"—an analytical orientation, critically interrogated by speakers such as Antoine Hennion, that has tended to privilege live performance over the mediatized object. Across panels and keynotes alike, the recording was reframed as music's mode of existence rather than its reproduction.

Antoine Hennion's opening keynote, "Recording Music: Saving It, or Making It?", captured this shift with philosophical precision. For Hennion, the act of recording does not merely preserve music but actively constitutes it, turning ephemeral performance into an enduring, mediated object that shapes perception and meaning. This provocation set the tone for discussions throughout the week, inspiring a re-evaluation of how mediation itself produces musical ontology.

This view was echoed in detailed analyses that placed the recording at the center of interpretation. Asbjørn Grønstad's reading of Sleater-Kinney's *Dig Me Out*, for instance, treated the recording not as a static text but as a dynamic site of listening, revealing how timbre, distortion, and production choices inscribe aesthetic and political meaning. Such work reaffirmed the vitality of the recording-as-primary-text paradigm, while extending it beyond formalism into questions of affect, ethics, and mediation.

The Technological History Turn: Rewriting the Genealogy of Sound

A second key reorientation articulated across the conference—the technological history turn—brought renewed attention to the material and ideological histories of sound technology. Rather than viewing technology as a neutral backdrop for creativity, presenters consistently treated it as a cultural artifact shaped by and shaping the values, economies, and aesthetic systems within which it circulates.

The panel "The Fairlight CMI: History, Technology, Ideology" offered the most cohesive example of this approach. Samantha Bennett, Paul Harkins, Leah Kardos, and Manuella Blackburn collectively reconstructed the sampler's history, tracing its

industrial networks, sound library composition, and creative afterlives in popular music production. Their work demonstrated how technological devices carry embedded ideologies—about authorship, authenticity, and innovation—and how these ideologies inform aesthetic conventions.

This historical and media-archaeological turn highlighted that every recording technology, from the tape machine to the digital workstation, bears the imprint of its cultural and economic moment. The recording, therefore, is not only a document of sound but also of the historical conditions that make particular sonic forms possible.

Recording as a Field of Power: Gender, Race, and Decoloniality

A third cluster of interventions extended long-standing IASPM concerns with gender, race, and postcoloniality into the material realm of recording—treating the medium itself, rather than musical content, as the site where power is inscribed and contested.

Gender was one of the most intensely debated axes of this inquiry. Panelists conceptualized the studio as a gendered space structured by asymmetrical access and visibility. Studies such as Francesca Cireddu's ethnography of Rome's alternative scene revealed how informal male camaraderie in rehearsal and studio environments often marginalizes women and queer participants. At the same time, researchers like Miaotong Yuan sought to recover the contributions of early female recording engineers in China, restoring "female figures in the echoes of history". Together, these approaches re-situated the studio as both a site of exclusion and a potential space for feminist reclamation.

From a broader geopolitical perspective, conference papers also reimagined recording as a decolonial practice and an instrument of cultural sovereignty. Agustina Checa's study of Peruvian independent labels, for instance, analyzed how local actors reissue forgotten domestic jazz, rock, and electronic records to reclaim historical narratives long overshadowed by Anglo-American frameworks. Similarly, Adil Johan's work on Malaysian hip-hop demonstrated how artists negotiate between Black diasporic traditions and local sensibilities, thereby challenging the unidirectional flow of influence in global music studies.

In these cases, the practice of recording emerges not only as a site of cultural negotiation but also as an act of epistemic resistance—one that seeks to rewrite who gets to record, who is heard, and whose histories are preserved. Dylan Robinson's keynote with Martin Daughtry, which interrogated the colonial violence of ethnographic recording and proposed an Indigenous ethics of listening, gave this political dimension a moral gravity that resonated throughout the conference.

Conclusion and Outlook

The intellectual trajectory from the 2023 "Popular Music in Crisis" conference to the 2025 focus on "Recording Popular Music" marked a substantial reorientation in the conference's thematic priorities. This shift signaled a turn from music's

external social environment toward an inward interrogation of the very medium that constitutes popular music. This "media turn" crystallized several key trends that may shape the future of popular music studies.

The conference reinforced a heightened awareness that recording technologies, studio infrastructures, and digital platforms function not as neutral tools but as formative agents shaping sound, creativity, and listening. Identity studies have continued their move inward, exposing how power and exclusion are inscribed in the act of recording itself, while historical work increasingly turns to sonic archives and remediations to rewrite the past through sound.

Equally transformative was the widening of IASPM's geographical and intellectual network. The strong presence of Chinese scholars at Paris 2025 was emblematic of the field's ongoing shift from an Anglo-American nucleus toward a global plurality. Their contributions introduced new cases and conceptual frameworks that challenged established paradigms and invited mutual learning. Emmanuel Parent of the IASPM Francophone Branch noted that the association now has an opportunity to learn from non-Western cultural powers such as China and India. IASPM Chair Samantha Bennett likewise emphasized that these new voices contribute to making the organization more diverse and more valuable, affirming IASPM's mission to share knowledge across borders in a divided world.

The Paris conference thus projected a compelling vision of where popular music studies could be heading: toward a more deeply mediatized understanding of sound, technology, and society, and toward a truly polycentric community of research. The dialogues initiated there promise a field that is more inclusive, critically resonant, and globally interconnected than ever before.