

New Model, Same Old Stories?

Reproducing Narratives of Democratization in Music Streaming Debates

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Abstract: At the turn of the 2020s, music is largely distributed and consumed via streaming services. This new “moment” in recorded music has attracted a lot of attention from scholars, with the aim of identifying the nature of transformations that are occurring at an economic and/or cultural level. This chapter critically assesses scholarly analyses of music production, distribution, and consumption in the age of streaming services. We note that accounts tend to work with specific assumptions underpinning the association between culture and technology, in particular in relation to the democratization of access. We argue in this chapter that music streaming services become a leitmotiv to anchor discourses about what music should ideally be, thus reproducing narratives that predate the emergence of music streaming.

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Introduction

At the turn of the 2020s, music is fully integrated within what many call the “platform society.”¹ Processes of production, distribution, and consumption are largely operated on, organized around, and mediated by, a number of web-sites, applications, and platforms across computers, phones, and other devices.² Interactive on-demand commercial interfaces such as Spotify, Tencent, Apple Music, Boomplay, and Deezer, along with other digital services such as broadcaster Pandora or “alternative platforms” SoundCloud and Bandcamp, have combined to make digital music the primary source of global commercial recording revenue since 2017.³ Music had already become fully “digitized” in some sense since the advent of peer-to-peer applications in the late 1990s.⁴ However, the advent of “digital music commodities”⁵ anchors music within the digital realm by providing stable and legal models of distribution that have largely reduced illegal file sharing and arguably threatened the subsistence of “physical” sound carriers. This new “moment” in the digitization of music is centered around usage enclosures and new affordances of often-automated recommendation, which draw on big data and algorithms to organize the distribution and consumption of content. This results in a range of (potentially) novel cultural practices that emerge from these new models of distribution and consumption. Within this broader digital ecosystem, we will focus on the

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- 1 José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
 - 2 We will mostly use “music streaming services” to refer specifically to the commercial interfaces which compensate copyright holders for interactive, on-demand usage. However, it will eventually become important to distinguish whether these services are being framed as new cultural intermediaries, as opposed to novel platforms. Our use of “platform” will rely on the theory of “platformization of cultural production” as used by D. Nieborg and T. Poell; see David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4275–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>.
 - 3 David Hesmondhalgh, Ellis Jones, and Andreas Rauth, “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” *Social Media + Society* (2019): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883429>; International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), *Global Music Report 2018: State of the Industry* (ifpi.org, 2018), <https://www.ifpi.org/ifpi-global-music-report-2018/>.
 - 4 David Hesmondhalgh and Leslie Meier, “What the Digitalisation of Music Tells Us about Capitalism, Culture and the Power of the Information Technology Sector,” *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 11 (2018): 1555–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1340498>.
 - 5 Jeremy Wade Morris, *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 2–6.

interactive commercial services in which listeners can access the catalogs of most commercial rights holders.

Music streaming is seen as further increasing the omnipresence of music in social life.⁶ With the help of algorithms, there is music that can be recommended for, and listened to in, every context of everyday life: playlists such as “Lazy Sunday,” “The Stress Buster,” or “Songs for Sleeping”⁷ have become prominent in how listeners access content. These and other kinds of playlists are often framed as human-curated collections. Meanwhile, user demographic and usage data enclosures are used to construct profiles, which are then used to provide automated recommendations to other similar profiles.⁸ While the degree of human decision-making in curation and recommendation is opaque,⁹ and even automated algorithmic recommendations are still composed of collective human activity,¹⁰ the streaming services’ logic is the prediction of quantified cultural practices: recommendations work with a preexisting set of preferences defined through usage metrics and the assumption that users want to further explore the catalog at their disposal and expand the presence of music in their everyday life.

In this context, a plethora of scholarly research attempts to understand what this model changes. We note that accounts can be summarized along two different yet intertwined objects of analysis: 1) a techno-economic approach that highlights how these streaming services place new key players in charge of music distribution;¹¹ and 2) a cultural perspective on the “aftermath” of

6 Hendrik Storstein Spilker, *Digital Music Distribution: The Sociology of Online Music Streams* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 21–4.

7 All examples are taken from Spotify in April 2020.

8 Robert Prey, “Musica Analytica: The Datafication of Listening,” in *Networked Music Cultures: Contemporary Approaches, Emerging Issues*, ed. Raphaël Nowak and Andrew Whelan (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 31–48.

9 Tiziano Bonini and Alessandro Gandini, “First Week Is Editorial, Second Week Is Algorithmic: Platform Gatekeepers and the Platformization of Music Curation,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (2019): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119880006>; Benjamin A. Morgan, “Revenue, Access, and Engagement via the In-house Curated Spotify Playlist in Australia,” *Popular Communication* 18, no. 1 (2020): 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2019.1649678>.

10 Nick Seaver, “Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics for the Ethnography of Algorithmic Systems,” *Big Data & Society* 4, no. 2 (2017): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717738104>.

11 Patryk Galuszka, “Music Aggregators and Intermediation of the Digital Music Market,” *International Journal of Communications* 9 (2015): 254–73, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3113/1298>; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, “What the Digitalisation of Music Tells Us.”

music streaming that questions how people “value” music.¹² At the core of these perspectives lies a particular approach to the nexus of music and democratization. In conducting a critical literature review on scholarship that analyzes the economic and/or cultural aftermath of the emergence of a “platform model” to music distribution and consumption, this chapter interrogates how such scholarship replicates some old myths or stories about what music ought to be—as a valued cultural object for instance and/or as an object worthy of economic retribution for artists. We find that critical discourses on this “new model” are often anchored onto “old stories” regarding the economic and cultural value of music. While we cannot aim to be exhaustive in our review of the literature on the topic, we focus here on accounts that specifically address the issue of “democratization” as a key indicator to evaluate the distribution of music content on streaming platforms. Thus, before critically analyzing each perspective on music streaming, the first section of this chapter is dedicated to defining “democracy” in the relation to accessing music.

What Does “Democratization” Actually Mean in Relation to Accessing Music?

In scholarly work about culture (and its association with technology), democratization can be an important concept that captures either the sweeping historical movement of a greater access to culture that dates back to the post-WWII era or the effects of the introduction of new technologies of communications and consumption on people’s access to content. However, as Hesmondhalgh argues, democratization is often raised as a notion but rarely explored in depth.¹³ Oftentimes the concept is used without any proper analysis of what it entangles or even suggests. As a result, popular narratives tend to reflect the concerns of specific groups while claiming to speak on behalf of what the technology means for music existentially. Yet, as we intend to show in this section, democratization takes on different and even contradictory meanings.

Yves Evrard distinguishes between two possible definitions of “democratization” by identifying two political positions that he calls “democratization of

12 David Arditi, “Music Everywhere: Setting a Digital Music Trap,” *Critical Sociology* 45, no. 4–5 (2019): 617–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920517729192>; Lee Marshall, “Do People Value Recorded Music?” *Cultural Sociology* 13, no. 2 (2019): 141–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975519839524>.

13 See David Hesmondhalgh, “Have Digital Communication Technologies Democratized the Media Industries?” in *Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh, 6th ed., 101–20 (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

culture” and “cultural democracy.”¹⁴ The democratization of culture refers to a greater access to cultural works for an audience lacking access (for social reasons). It can be initiated or emerge from cultural government policy, economic growth, cultural industry strategy, or a combination of these. Evrard notes that “a mark of success for cultural policy would be a demographic structure for attendance to major artworks that matches that of the total population.”¹⁵ The success of the democratization of culture approach is measured by the erasure of the disparities between class, gender, and age groups in the demographics of cultural consumption. By contrast, the second possible definition of democratization refers to what Evrard calls “cultural democracy,” defined

as one founded on free individual choice, in which the role of a cultural policy is not to interfere with the preferences expressed by citizen-consumers but to support the choices made by individuals or social groups through a regulatory policy applied to the distribution of information or the structures of supply.¹⁶

In this case, the emphasis on individual choices assumes that individuals are either free to choose content that pleases them, or that they ought to be free to do so. The dichotomy between the two different positions is “rooted in fundamental philosophical debates”¹⁷ and is useful to uncover the political positions behind critical scholarships on music and technologies, particularly in relation to the most recent development of music streaming.

In cultural studies, the democratization of culture position can be found for instance in the writings of Theodor W. Adorno, where lower strata of a society (the “masses”) who consume popular culture are seen as dominated and passive.¹⁸ The solution to achieve “emancipation” is found in an access to high culture, which heightens the senses. Adorno defends an argument that popular culture is bad because it is repetitive and standardized.¹⁹ A more thorough and measured approach to the democratization of culture is found in Pierre Bourdieu’s illustrious investigation of French cultural practices.²⁰ In contrast with Adorno, Bourdieu argues that it is the social organization that

14 Yves Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?” *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 27, no. 3 (1997): 167–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632929709596961>.

15 Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?,” 167–68.

16 Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?,” 168.

17 Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?,” 169.

18 Theodor W. Adorno, *Current of Music. Elements of a Radio Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 92–113.

19 Adorno, *Current of Music*, 153.

20 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

deems popular culture bad. Here again, cultural content is denoted with status on a hierarchy from high and legitimate to low and dominated. On the other hand, the democracy of culture position implies “a network [...] of independent units”²¹ and is exemplified by scholarly accounts that emphasize the “choices,” or at least the relative autonomy, of cultural groups, such as in subcultural theory.²²

We briefly mention these accounts as a way to highlight how their positions—if not fully disclosed—have been discussed and situated within the paradigms established by Evrard, who notes fundamental philosophical debates behind each position are concerned with theories of aesthetics:

The main basis for this dichotomy lies in the difference between beauty and aesthetics. In the [case of the democratization of culture position], there are objective, universal norms present in the work of art, which give it its value. Democratization would seek to disseminate these norms or create a universal canon. By contrast the theory of aesthetics [...] bases value on the pleasure or satisfaction derived from contemplating a work of art or attending a performance, that is, the subjective judgment of taste. Even though the exercise of judgment is universal, the outcome is not, and this leads to different choices that may be observed and analysed.²³

The issue underpinned by the two perspectives on democratization questions a particular approach to the value of culture: do objects possess an objective aesthetic value? Or does the aesthetic value subjectively emerge through interactions with the object?

With regard particularly to music and technologies, we find that authors' positions on culture are not always (fully) disclosed, but rather subsumed and hidden behind more micro foci. However, from our critical review of the literature, we find arguments relating to the cultural democracy position in the fields of popular music studies, science and technology studies, cultural studies, and sociology. In fact, we can trace a genealogy of different positions that have had academic currency and momentum over time. Simon Frith suggests that scholarly discourses on music and aesthetics have successively moved from the position “if it's popular it must be bad” (as in Adorno), to the position “if it's popular it must be bad, unless it's popular with the right people” (as in subcultural theory), and finally to the position “if it's popular it must be good!” (as in em-

21 Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?,” 170.

22 See for example Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

23 Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?,” 168.

pirical accounts of listening).²⁴ The more celebratory perspective corresponds to a cultural democracy position whereby individuals exercise free choice over what music they produce, distribute, and listen to, assisted by the technological evolution of recorded music, often seen as detrimental to the question of access. The advent of music streaming services somehow reconfigures scholarly perspectives on music. We find that the notion of democratization acts as the backdrop of contemporary accounts critically evaluating what music streaming has economically or culturally changed to the realm of recorded music. The next section focuses on the economics of music streaming.

Artists, Producers, and the Economics of Music Streaming

Music streaming has become the dominant source of global revenue from recordings.²⁵ Its structural configuration has seen the emergence of “new players” in charge of music distribution and playback,²⁶ though the market dominance of oligopolistic rights holders has never been undermined.²⁷ The question is not of ownership or market share of copyright revenue, but of whether or not these new players have made the economic structures of music distribution more or less democratic.

A range of discourses engage this question through lenses such as rates of payment to rights holders,²⁸ broad revenue flows across sectors,²⁹ or subscrip-

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- 24 Simon Frith, “The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent: Defending Popular Culture from the Populists,” *Diacritics* 21, no. 4 (1991): 102–4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/465379>.
 - 25 IFPI, *Global Music Report* 2018.
 - 26 Galuszka, “Music Aggregators”; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, “What the Digitalisation of Music Tells Us.”
 - 27 Peter Tschmuck, *The Economics of Music* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2017), 86.
 - 28 Lee Marshall, “Let’s Keep Music Special. F—Spotify: On-demand Streaming and the Controversy over Artist Royalties,” *Creative Industries Journal* 8, no. 2 (2015): 177–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2015.1096618>; Rethink Music Initiative (Berklee Institute of Creative Entrepreneurship), “Fair Music: Transparency and Payment Flows in the music industry,” 2015, <https://www.rethink-music.com/research/fair-music-transparency-and-payment-flows-in-the-music-industry>.
 - 29 Jason B. Bazinet, Kota Ezawa, Mark May, Thomas A Singlehurst, Jim Suva, and Alicia Yap, *Putting The Band Back Together: Remastering the World of Music*. Citi GPS: Global Perspectives & Solutions, 2018, <https://www.citivelocity.com/citigps/music-industry/>; Alan B. Krueger, *Rockonomics: A Backstage Tour of What the Music Industry Can Teach Us about Economics and Life* (New York: Currency, 2019).

tion price³⁰ as measures of the economic harm—or democratic potential—of music streaming. Though all revenue-based arguments provide only a partial perspective, they overall paint a picture where music streaming benefits consumers and the rights holders of catalogues and mass hits, while implying that recording artists and songwriters are suffering from a disappearance of income. As Hesmondhalgh points out, these critical economic arguments rely on a “dubious” focus on rates of payment to rights holders, which present claims of an overall decline in conditions for musicians, while “it seems clear that the current system retains the striking inequalities and generally poor working conditions that characterized its predecessors.”³¹ When asking whether streaming is more or less democratic from an economic perspective, we must first recognize that the recording industry has long been premised on widespread economic failure and rare lucrative mass success, where revenue is top-heavy and most recordings do not cover their investment costs.³² We focus our attention to two types of perspectives in this section—those exploring royalty payments and those assessing access to the marketplace.

Royalty Payments as the Economic Measure of Fairness

A commonly attempted approach to answer this question is purely financial and concerns royalty payments to recording artists. Arguments about music streaming in journalistic and vernacular accounts center around concepts of “fairness” and “transparency,”³³ with the rate of payment to rights holders for

30 Matt Brennan, and Kyle Devine, “The Cost of Music.” *Popular Music* 39, no. 1 (2020): 43–65, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0261143019000552>.

31 David Hesmondhalgh, “Is Music Streaming Bad for Musicians? Problems of Evidence and Argument,” *New Media and Society* (September 2020): 1–18, <http://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820953541>.

32 Lee Marshall, “The Structural Functions of Stardom in the Recording Industry,” *Popular Music and Society* 36, no. 5 (2013): 578–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2012.718509>.

33 Adjacent to these more high-profile arguments around rates of payment lie discussions around the “transparency” of how payments are handled; see Paul Resnikoff, “Welcome to the ‘Royalty Black Box,’ the Music Industry’s \$2.5 Billion Underground Economy,” *Digital Music News* (blog), August 3, 2017, <https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2017/08/03/music-industry-royalty-black-box/>. For an in-depth exploration of the concept of “transparency,” see Jay Mogis, “Transparency, Technology and Trust: Music Metrics and Cultural Distortion” (Ph.D. diss., Queensland University of Technology, 2020). We focus on “fairness” in this chapter.

usage of songs and recordings receiving particular attention.³⁴ While these outputs impact holders of sound recording and song copyrights, it is common to see rhetorical arguments reduced to how musicians and songwriters are paid by commercial streaming services. Two discursive subtleties are important to note here: the framing of these firms paying “musicians” and “songwriters” as opposed to “copyright owners” or “rights holders,” and a frequent comparison of digital streaming’s usage-based revenue calculations to the older sales model of purchasing a personal copy of a recording for unlimited personal use. These strategies are used to imply that streaming services (Spotify in particular)³⁵ are unfair to musicians broadly and in need of more “democratization.” However, these critical accounts typically present comparisons to the larger amounts paid for ownership for unlimited use as a sufficient demonstration of past systems being more lucrative, and also often imply that the streaming services pay royalties to artists, not rights holders. Even well-argued institutional research papers on the topic of streaming revenue rates use “fairness” and “transparency” uncritically.³⁶ Moreover, the discursive focus on how musicians are compensated often completely neglects the issue of how record labels and publishers compensate the creators under contract. In many instances, critiques of Spotify’s rates of payments resemble older political economy arguments directed at the dominant record labels and publishers on whom their production, and ultimately their livelihoods, ostensibly depend.³⁷ When looking at the rates paid to copyright holders by Spotify, the oligopolistic powers remain significantly involved in the negotiation of how much is paid for copyright usage. The systemic role of record labels, publishers, and collecting societies in negotiating rates and paying royalties is often ignored.

Obfuscated elements of complex revenue structures further problematize arguments about payment rates. Rates paid to rights holders are based on sharing the revenue Spotify receives from subscriptions and advertisers in a territory, and the particular amounts paid to the rights holders are dependent

34 Marshall, “Let’s Keep Music Special. F—Spotify”; Aram Sinnreich, “Slicing the Pie: The Search for an Equitable Recorded Music Economy,” in *Business Innovation and Disruption in the Music Industry*, ed. Patrik Wikström and Robert DeFillippi (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), 153–74.

35 When it comes to revenue and access controversies, Spotify has been the primary target and will be the main example. For a critical history of the company, see Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge, MA: Isc Press, 2019).

36 Rethink Music Initiative, “Fair Music.”

37 Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, *Rock’n’roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977); Aram Sinnreich, *The Piracy Crusade* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

on a variety of factors, of which we will mention only a few. The record label or aggregator service which has uploaded the recordings will have negotiated their own specific deal with Spotify, often under a non-disclosure agreement. The performance rights organizations responsible for the collection of song royalties (which are defined differently around the world) negotiate the rate for their catalog in each territory. In different countries, copyright laws and structures will impact who can collect which rights and who can negotiate for those rights holders. Publishing mechanical royalty payments are handled quite differently in the USA than in other countries, for example, with the government directly involved in setting the rates. Since Spotify's revenue pool is shared, paying more to one group of rights holders means less revenue for others. Ultimately, the rates paid to rights holders or aggregators per stream vary considerably. Demanding one group (songwriters for example) to be paid higher rates is arguing, in essence, that other groups (recording rights holders) should be paid less.

A second critical point concerns the deals between rights holders and musicians, including issues of artist royalty payments. The question of what a musician will be paid quickly becomes a query of who they work with. Record labels, aggregators, performance rights organizations, and even managers of the world's most popular artist brands all compete with each other for their share of the available revenue from the platforms. Revenue studies will obtain different results based on methodology and sample. Still, even if a broader picture among groups can be seen in these large studies, given the heterogeneous concerns of performing musicians, songwriters, recording engineers, managers, rights holders, concert promoters, and countless other stakeholder groups involved in the music business, the search for a grand narrative of democratization or democracy upon which everyone can agree will remain elusive using rates of payment.

Access to the Marketplace

A second measure of the economic impact induced by music streaming is the one of access to the marketplace. In that sense, music streaming represents a major structural shift. Digital technology allows musicians to produce and distribute their recordings with relative ease, especially in the context of the transition from the ownership model to access.³⁸ The historical difficulty for producers to get releases into retail stores alongside that of major-label albums was famously the concern of smaller record labels and unsigned artist brands

38 Patrik Wikström, *The Music Industry: Music in the Cloud*. 3rd ed. (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

in the pre-internet area, when recording was prohibitively expensive and mainstream (physical) distribution dominated by the major labels. Nowadays, any producer can pay a small fee to put their music into the streaming platform catalogues and receive some revenue for it. Spotify has reported that over 40,000 songs are uploaded to their ecosystem each day and the vast majority of recordings will fail to generate enough usage and revenue to pay for this fee.³⁹ One example of a new narrative is home recording artist Steve Benjamins,⁴⁰ who claims that he collects \$400 per month without playing live, and his streams are driven through Spotify's playlists and automated algorithmic recommendation tools. Benjamins does not work with a record label or hire other musicians. If we are to take this case as indicative of a modest new revenue structure (rather than hyperbole more in line with the viral myth that intermediaries are no longer needed), it points towards a production strategy created by platformization which is in fact more "democratic" from a systemic perspective. The case shows that Spotify's discovery tools have created opportunities for a production method and level of investment which previously would not have found an audience at scale. And being that this is something new, which threatens existing revenue structures and incumbents, it is to be expected that status quo interests will resist or challenge the legitimacy of these kinds of stories as outliers, or the music as inauthentic. Admittedly, Benjamins provides an example of a specific narrative that has been difficult to confirm. Bearing this in mind, stories such as that of Benjamins should not necessarily be taken as proof of a new structure that is easily accessible to all, but rather a need for more research into how prevalent and accurate these new kinds of narratives actually are.

Coming on top of the question of "access" is the issue of "visibility" of recordings in the crowded marketplace of the digital music commodity. In order to get deeper inside the concept of "access" and what has and has not shifted, we look at the words of musician and activist Jenny Toomey, founder of the Future of Music Coalition, when internet technology was just beginning to affect structures of music industries in 2001:

Do traditional music business models serve musicians? In my opinion, aside from the cultural legitimization that comes with signing a major label deal,

39 Tim Ingham, "Nearly 40,000 Tracks Are Now Being Added to Spotify Every Single Day," *Music Business Worldwide* (blog), April 29, 2019, <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/nearly-40000-tracks-are-now-being-added-to-spotify-every-single-day/>.

40 Steve Benjamins, "How Spotify & Discover Weekly Earns Me \$400 / Month," *Steve Benjamins* (blog), March 14, 2019, <https://www.stevebenjamins.com/blog/spotify-and-discover-weekly>.

there are three need-based reasons why musicians sign major labor deals. The first one is *access to resources* [...]. The second reason is *access to distribution* [...]. The final reason that artists are signing these deals is *access to promotion*.⁴¹

It is the second of these three forms of access, that of distribution in the sense of delivery from producer to listener, which streaming platforms have solved brilliantly. The access to promotion is related to how “discovery” works within the streaming interface and is the most interesting to explore. Generating sufficient interest in a song or artist brand to make them fashionable still requires investment and expertise. Regardless of their access to catalogues, producers face a saturated space where everyone aims at attracting users’ attention on platforms, with, in return, a lot of content that is never listened to. Streaming services have created infomediary ecosystems which mine, monitor, and mediate the way songs are used and presented.⁴² From the perspective of an artist brand, record label, or publisher wishing to see recordings promoted within the digital music commodity interface, the opaque nature of the sociotechnical intermediary easily leads to suspicion of influence on the process being wielded by the oligopolistic powers. The skepticism of oligopolies’ influence on the promotion/discovery process can be seen as the need for Spotify to democratize its access to promotion. This again extends old logics about corrupt or entrenched gatekeepers who are not being “fair” to artist brands or songs which are lacking in capital. The alternate view, which is only more recently starting to emerge through high-profile cases such as *Chance the Rapper*⁴³ or more obscure ones like *Benjamins*, is that there are niches where unsigned artist brands earn revenue without the reliance on record labels, other promotional services, or even performing concerts.

From our brief exploration of the economic aspect of the music streaming model, we note that the focus either on royalty payments or on access to the marketplace produces different results in the evaluation of said model as a potential for a more democratic popular music market. Pointing out the micro-payments of commercial streaming services or the new possibilities for unsigned “amateur” artists to share their content on streaming platforms are

41 Jenny Toomey, “The Future of Music,” *Texas Intellectual Property Law Journal* 10, no. 2 (2001): 227, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/tipj10&div=13>.

42 Jeremy Wade Morris, “Curation by Code: Infomediaries and the Data Mining of Taste,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4–5 (2015): 446–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415577387>.

43 Tom Johnson, “Chance the Rapper, Spotify, and Musical Categorization in the 2010s,” *American Music* 38, no. 2 (2020): 176–96, <https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.38.2.0176>.

only examples of structural reconfigurations in the production and distribution of popular music. Moreover, framing debates about revenue rates as directly between artists/songwriters and the services extends old logics around the ideology of stardom, which seek to conceal the professional mechanisms and labor involved in the commercialization of recordings and artist brands.⁴⁴ Under this ideology, success is due to the amazing charisma and talent of artist personas, while failure is accepted as the natural outcome for those who lack those rare gifts or who fail to connect with the right stakeholders who can nurture and develop them. This both hides the role of music business workers and distances their effort from the outcomes.

When particular stories of economic success or failure become the basis upon which to construct an evaluative narrative of streaming music, then we find that these narratives are in fact rooted in other assumptions as to what an *ideal* situation should resemble, but which are never fully established and fail to acknowledge the underlying design of recording industries to overproduce in search of a few stars, alongside the mass failure of most commercial releases and artist brands. In the case of royalty payments, what would a “fair” redistribution consist of, and to whom should it be paid? In the case of the streaming marketplace, who should be able to put their music into the ecosystem and benefit from it? Here is where the perspective of the “platformization of cultural production” becomes helpful.⁴⁵ Should artist brands and songwriters optimize their production for the platform, as opposed to the audience or individual listener? Whether “platformization” is seen as positive or negative for the music industries broadly relates to the question: should commercial sustainability continue to be contingent upon stakeholder experts and intermediaries to locate and develop stars and hit songs, especially given the high rate of failure? We argue that different answers to these questions can be uncovered, and they are determined by the particular approach that authors have of music and its relationship to either a democratization of culture or cultural democracy paradigm.⁴⁶ In the next section, we continue on our critical overview of accounts framing music streaming’s *changes*, but this time, in cultural terms.

Audiences and the Cultural Aftermath of Music Streaming

Besides economic perspectives on how music streaming *changes* how artists and producers distribute their music, more recent discussions move towards

44 Marshall, “The Structural Functions of Stardom in the Recording Industry.”

45 Nieborg and Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production.”

46 Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?”

the “cultural” aftermath of the streaming model. To some authors, the question is laid out as follows: “what has streaming done to music’s value?”⁴⁷ This interrogation underpins how the technological and economic configuration of music streaming changes, or contributes to change, the value of music as cultural content.

Taste and Consumption Practices

With the shift towards audience studies in the 1970s and 1980s, consumers of culture have been described as possessing a certain autonomy.⁴⁸ Scholarly accounts of audiences’ *ways of doing* align with a cultural democracy position.⁴⁹ In the case of music, this translates into the following question: “what does [music] make people do?”⁵⁰ When interrogating audiences, scholars do not focus on the type of cultural content that is listened to as much as they question 1) the contexts within which listening practices are “performed,” and 2) what happens within the interactions with music, with the idea that music represents a “capacity for social action.”⁵¹ As such, listening *practices* are discussed in relation to how affective outcomes emerge. Music is understood in relation to its use value, meaning that it is *valued* by consumers, and therefore socially *valuable*, because it enables, accompanies, and affects.

In the age of music streaming, the presence of music in everyday life is said to increase.⁵² Streaming services ensure a continuous musical flow by providing a playlist that fits every aspect of one’s daily routine. The technological means to access and listen to music are understood as offering more options to manage an everyday accompaniment of music. A cultural democracy approach to music considers listeners as competent in their choices of music content that is suited to the different listening practices carried on in their everyday life, in direct contrast to the recording industry view that experts and intermediaries are

47 See, among others, David Arditi, “Music Everywhere”; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, “What the Digitalisation of Music Tells Us”; Marshall, “Do People Value Recorded Music?”

48 David Looseley, “Antoine Hennion and the Sociology of Music,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 12, no. 3 (2016): 341–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630601020611>.

49 E.g. Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?”

50 Antoine Hennion, “Musiques, Présentez-vous! Une Comparaison entre le Rap et la Techno,” *French Cultural Studies* 16 (2005): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0957155805053702>.

51 Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 153.

52 See Spilker, *Digital Music Distribution: The Sociology of Online Music Streams*, 21–4.

needed to help listeners choose “the best music.” Automated algorithms that organize recommendations present the potential to increase individuals’ access to music, for instance through suggestions of automated playlists that aim at capturing a particular mood. However, algorithms construct user profiles on the basis of a pre-existing repertoire of preferences and proximity with other users.⁵³ In that regard, music streaming cannot necessarily be seen as the tool that will transform every user’s taste one way or another. The aim of the commercial services is to get users to pay a monthly subscription. They do so by deploying algorithms that suggest content that must feel new, but also cannot be too different from the songs they usually listen to.

The process for artists to feature in playlists on streaming platforms is somewhat opaque, and it has been recently reported that rights holders attempt to influence playlist curators through “pitching” releases.⁵⁴ With algorithmic tools also involved, the curation of playlists is still seen as a new version of pitching radio programmers, magazine editors, or record store retailers to feature certain songs or releases over others. For producers unable to get their songs onto these playlists, the process seems unfair and in need of democratization. These criticisms echo old narratives of the corrupt influence of radio promotion companies and major labels.⁵⁵ The extension of older recording industry concepts frames these tools of recommendation and curation as new sociotechnical intermediaries which are needed to add value to songs, and can be influenced through strategic campaigns of influence, extending the old logics around publicity, promotion, and marketing. In this frame, the producers are still optimizing music for audiences. Alternately, the platformization view would portray these same streaming services as platforms: novel structures which require different production approaches than cultural intermediaries. This view also constrains the formerly vital role of recording industry stakeholders in favor of the platforms. Whether seen as new versions of old intermediaries, or as novel platforms, the end result is that the way artist brands, albums, and songs are selected into playlists and other automated recommendation features is a process that remains curated and mediated for users. Now the question is whether this very process of curation and mediation is seen as a necessary form of imposition of certain artists and songs onto users’ everyday listening practices or a mere suggestion as to what content can be a better fit with what everyday activity.

53 Prey, “Musica Analytica.”

54 Morgan, “Revenue, Access, and Engagement.”

55 Fredric Dannen, *Hit Men: Power Brokers and Fast Money Inside the Music Business* (Sydney: Muller, 1990).

The importance of music streaming as a mode of music consumption raises an important theoretical conundrum. Eric Drott for instance argues that even the desire to consume new music needs to be manufactured, implying that the urge to hear new music is itself fabricated in the interest of platform capitalism.⁵⁶ David Arditi goes further by arguing that the ubiquity of music as organized by streaming platforms means that we are “inundated” with music.⁵⁷ The “digital music trap” commodifies our everyday existence, turns music consumers into music users, and makes us pay for music with cash or data for access to a platform. Arditi’s critique of music streaming aligns with a democratization of culture perspective, whereby the techno-cultural infrastructure (here, streaming services) entraps and dominates its users by imposing a continuous stream of music.

A cultural democracy perspective would instead highlight how streaming platforms enable (to some extent) different “independent units”⁵⁸ to better connect and feed each other’s taste and practices. Moreover, the autonomy of music consumers means that they are given more opportunities—through access to a large catalog of music content—to find the music that is better suited to their everyday tasks and with the aim of an affective outcome. The opposition between the two paradigms points to a different approach to the issue of the value of music in the age of streaming, which we explore more closely in the next section.

Music’s Presence, Listeners’ Attention ... and Regimes of Cultural Value

The issue of the value of music has recently become of prominent significance across scholarly publications.⁵⁹ The question is not so much about whether the cultural value of music has evolved over time, since we can simply point to the historical and cultural evolution of popular music, its division and development into various genres, its increasing presence within societies, and the evolution of technologies that enable humans to produce, distribute, and consume it. Instead, the question lies in whether the increasing “ubiquity” of music transforms how we value it in a non-econometric sense, or: does the presence of music in contemporary capitalistic societies—and especially mediated by streaming services—make it more valuable to *people*, or less valuable?

56 Eric Drott, “Why the Next Song Matters: Streaming, Recommendation, Scarcity,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 15, no. 3 (2018): 325–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1478572218000245>.

57 David Arditi, “Music Everywhere,” 617–18

58 Evrard, “Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?,” 170.

59 See, among others, David Arditi, “Music Everywhere”; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, “What the Digitalisation of Music Tells Us.”

While we witness a resurgence of publications on the issue of music's cultural value, and particularly in relation to its association with streaming platforms, we first need to ask whether music streaming constitutes a point of rupture. Of course, all authors would point to the genealogy of digital music as laying the grounds for the current organization of music streaming. Nevertheless, there may be something specific to music streaming in the age of platform ecosystems which would tip the issue "over the line." For instance, while Arditi acknowledges that recorded music has always been a commodity, the current techno-economic infrastructure, which he analyses as a "digital music trap," further commodifies music. He writes: "the digital music trap allows for the perpetual exploitation of listening-labor through the expanded means of music consumption."⁶⁰ Likewise, in Hesmondhalgh and Meier's cultural history of the evolution of digital music, we find that the third "moment" that is characterized by the dominance of IT companies may result in a "loss" of "music's power."⁶¹

In those critics, we note two dominant issues that are somewhat located into the technological infrastructure of music consumption: first, there is a loss of music's economic value (we no longer pay for units); second, the ubiquitous background presence of music means we do not pay attention to it, which reduces its emotional force. On that later point, Lee Marshall draws on a neo-classical approach to value (stipulating that people need to be "aware" of objects) and notes that "the idea of ubiquitous listening can contribute to an explanation as to why many individuals may not view music as particularly valuable, especially given that, by definition, this kind of musical experience exists on the periphery of an individual's consciousness."⁶² Tying those two issues together, he adds that "it is not difficult to see why peripheral awareness of low-intensity musical experience may result in most people thinking that music is not worth paying for, or at least not paying much for."⁶³ A key concept that is present across the accounts of Arditi, Hesmondhalgh and Meier, and Marshall is the one of the "average listener," which somehow enables them to speak on behalf of a disembodied collective of individuals. In that regard, the issue of music's ubiquity is understood as having a direct correlation with the one of "attention," which is itself constructed as a monolith: background music means "no attention." Such critics are reminiscent of the democratization paradigm, whereby music listeners are constructed as a whole body of passive consumers.⁶⁴

60 Arditi, "Music Everywhere: Setting a Digital Music Trap," 625.

61 Hesmondhalgh and Meier, "What the Digitalisation of Music Tells Us," 1568.

62 Marshall, "Do People Value Recorded Music?," 153.

63 Marshall, "Do People Value Recorded Music?," 153.

64 See Evrard, "Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?," 171.

The cultural democracy approach to music as defended by the likes of Hennion or DeNora emphasizes the emotional forces of music as experienced by competent and active individuals.⁶⁵ To David Looseley, this is a narrative about music's "expressive value."⁶⁶ Although authors in this paradigm largely fail to provide a true perspective on how technological means to music consumption play a critical part in how individuals access and listen to music,⁶⁷ there is an underlying assumption that technologies such as CDs, MP3 files, and now streaming platforms do not "dominate" consumers as much as they offer pathways through which musical explorations are possible. While this perspective provides very little insight on the actual structural organization of music distribution, it directly opposes the view that music's emotional force results from a domination from the top, a rather philosophical challenge to the anxiety about the need for intermediaries to help identify appropriate canons. Instead, it considers individuals' affective responses to music as the basis upon which any discourse on music's emotional force and cultural value becomes possible.

The different perspectives on value certainly make the two paradigms (democratization of culture and cultural democracy) quite apparent in how different authors approach the issue of music's contemporary value. The question that remains is the actual role that is to be attributed to streaming platforms in the changes (for better or worse) to music's cultural value. As Marshall contends, "it is possible that new digital technologies have simply revealed some of the underlying social dynamics of music listening rather than causing any kind of cultural devaluation."⁶⁸ What is certain, however, is that those conversations will continue to develop over the coming years.

Conclusion

The current state of recorded music, which is largely organized around music streaming, has attracted a great deal of attention from scholars. In this chapter, we have attempted to critically discuss some of the accounts that evaluate the "nature" of current transformations to the production, distribution, and consumption of music. By deploying Evrard's dichotomy of positions towards

65 See Hennion, "Musiques, Présentez-vous! Une Comparaison entre le Rap et la Techno" or DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*.

66 Looseley, "Antoine Hennion and the Sociology of Music," 343.

67 Raphaël Nowak, *Consuming Music in the Digital Age. Technologies, Roles and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

68 Marshall, "Do People Value Recorded Music?," 153.

culture and its status, we are able to understand how these accounts are actually situated within particular logics, which in turn betray particular expectations about the relationship between music and contemporary society. We note that following the emergence of audience studies in the 1970s and 1980s,⁶⁹ and particularly from the 1990s, the cultural democracy paradigm has dominated certain research fields. Led notably by sociologists such as DeNora and Hennion, who have contributed to new knowledge about music and its emotional forces, this approach has certainly influenced a particular strain of music research. In opposition, we witness a rising tide of critics that question positivist conclusions about music's presence in contemporary societies.⁷⁰ The current state of music distribution and consumption based on streaming provides an ideal culprit to point to the limitations of the cultural democracy paradigm and/or to argue against its main conclusions. We here want to conclude with two main ideas from our critical evaluation of accounts on music and streaming:

First, we note that analyses of music streaming tend to deploy particular examples or stories to base a discursive evaluation of the *whole* situation. However, depending on what the analyses focus on—be it royalty payments, access to the marketplace, attention paid to music—the evaluations of the current situation differ. We argue that the focus on one stakeholder perspective, personal narrative (of success or failure), or technological location to construct a critical evaluation of the current music streaming ecosystem fails to capture the complexity of the political, social, and cultural organizations that enable these very stories to emerge and infrastructures to exist, disseminate, and become successful in the first place. Rather than providing a finite point, these stories are in need of further scrutiny because they are in fact passageways to explore the political and social organization that enables them.

Second, even if they can remain somewhat concealed, ideas are carried in each account concerning for example what music *ought* to be, who *ought* to be remunerated for it, and how it *ought* to be listened to. Streaming services become a leitmotif to construct a critical narrative as to why music becomes something that it should *ideally* not be, and in that regard, we argue that such accounts convey “old stories” about an ideal state of music as an economic and/or cultural object. Those critics evaluate the current state of music against an invisible benchmark, inasmuch as they do not clearly state what the reference point is. Thus, to those critics, we ask the following questions (among many others): With regard to the economics of streaming, what would a “fair” redistribution of royalty payment resemble? Who should receive less in order

69 Looseley, “Antoine Hennion and the Sociology of Music.”

70 Primarily from the 2000s, and for instance through the work of David Hesmondhalgh.

to compensate those who “deserve” more, and who should be entitled to judge this? When it comes to culturally valuing music, what does paying attention to music actually mean? What are the conditions within which it can happen? While we certainly do not wish to argue against the very legitimacy of deploying a critical evaluation of music streaming, we would instead invite authors to more clearly establish what the counterpart to a bad situation is. In the absence of such discourse, we are instead left with the perspective of the onlooker as constitutive of what music—its economic and cultural value—is.

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