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Technofeudal Music Production and Distribution: How "Streaming Realism" Changes the Popular Music World, and Music Education Interventions

Holt Stuart-Hitchcox
York University (Canada)

Abstract

Through their control of digital platforms, Varoufakis (2023) argues that tech oligarchs increasingly dictate the economic, social, and cultural arrangements of human life. In these now-prominent digital spaces, platform owners control modes of human interaction, accepted modalities of cultural "content," and economic conditions for consumers, producers, and distributors of products and services. Building on Varoufakis' thinking, I consider the impacts of digital capitalism and technofeudalism on the production of music, before presenting subsequent music education interventions. I begin by sketching the impacts of technofeudalism on cultural production, detailing how streaming platforms influence the writing, recording, and distribution of music. I then explore the economics of professional musicianship on streaming services, particularly examining how streaming decommodifies recorded music and favors the music of "superstars" over smaller independent artists. In closing, I present music pedagogy interventions that both interrogate the mechanics of streaming services and encourage alternative digital, physical, social, and live pathways for music exploration and listening. These alternative pathways seek to dispel the "realism" (Fisher 2009) of music streaming as the only listening game in town.

Keywords

Music education, streaming, capitalism, technofeudalism, cultural production

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The early twenty-first century has played host to a transformation in human economic and social organization, where both life and work increasingly take place on a variety of digital platforms, including social media sites (Instagram, Facebook, X, Tik Tok), digital marketplaces (Amazon, AliExpress, Etsy), and streaming services (Spotify, Netflix, YouTube). Greek economist Yanis Varoufakis (2023) argues that life on these now ubiquitous and greatly influential platforms resembles a sort of feudalism. However, in contrast to a traditional feudal state, today's fiefdoms exist in the digital cloud, and humans inhabit them through phones, televisions, and computers. Platforms are governed by their owners—the digital equivalent of feudal lords—which Varoufakis calls "cloudalists." These owners set the agendas and rules for how their platforms are arranged and inhabited, and, through algorithms, dictate what users "see (or don't see)" (89). Users, or "cloud serfs" (86), create platform content and expose their own personal data to platforms for little compensation, essentially providing platforms with both a product and customer for free, and sometimes even pay a fee to participate. Company workers, or "cloud proles" (83), keep the sites running, doing maintenance and physical labour, often for low wages. Meanwhile, "vassals" (90), or businesses that sell products in these digital spaces, profit from platforms whilst paying a percentage to the platform owner. Varoufakis terms this entire arrangement *technofeudalism*.

As platform participation becomes a normalized mode of human life, digital abstinence can be ruinous, both for young people, whose digital social identity is essential in both work and leisure (Varoufakis 2023, 181), and for vendors, businesses, or artists, who must now accede to these platforms to reach the vast majority of their client bases (131). It is thus difficult to see platform participation as optional, as "opting out" may have severe consequences. As such, today individuals navigate the imposed conditions of various digital "fiefs" (90) governed by the likes of Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, or Mark Zuckerberg, spaces that can have pronounced effects on day-to-day living.

Digital capitalism and technofeudalism have had significant impacts on the production of music and the livelihoods of musicians. This is particularly true in the case of streaming platforms. The rules and conventions of these platforms change the way that we make music, as we adapt to serve their structures and formats. Further, the economic conditions of streaming platforms perpetuate (and arguably intensify) wealth stratification in music production, impeding artists who

lack financial resources[1] from featuring prominently in broader cultural areas. These areas are increasingly gatekept by criteria set and determined through the mechanisms of digital platforms, such as streaming numbers and social media engagement.

Music holds the potential to contribute to positive social and political reform, namely through its ability to represent difficult situations and galvanize countercultural movements towards social change (Jameson 1991). As such, the systemic marginalization of "lower income"[2] or "working-class"[3] music artists is cause for concern. These voices are valuable contributors to social and economic critiques, with perspectives situated in lived experiences. In response, the enclosure or foreclosure of creative processes within these platforms deserves scrutiny, as the impacts of platform conventions often interfere with the representative capabilities of music. As Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) argues, there is no inherent countercultural revolutionary property to music; instead, countercultural things can be done *with* music to act upon or change the world, but music can just as easily be "bad for you" (Philpott 2012, 48). Technofeudal systems strongly impede the ability for music to serve as a means of "mapping" (Jameson 1991) the difficulties and injustices of our present moment, as these platforms incentivize adherence to specific modes of algorithmic manipulation and formatting. Beyond algorithmic dimensions, "playlist curation" and similar phenomena remain in the hands of industry gatekeepers, who govern the dynamics of media distribution in these formats, maintaining "music industry" positions of power akin to the traditional workings of record companies and radio conglomerates (McDonald 2024). As I argue below, these developments are relevant to music education, and thus present important considerations for today's music educators.

In this article's first section, I sketch the impacts of technofeudalism specifically on music production. Although cultural production has always had ties to commerce and labour dynamics, Mark Fisher (2009) explains that cybercapitalism's intense commodification of everything strips culture of its protection from the brutal, impassive indifference of the open market. Even in the early 2000s (Fisher's time of writing), this made social commentary exceedingly difficult, as music was increasingly subordinated to a "business ontology" (Fisher 2009), serving profit motives, market pressures, and the whims of music distribution executives. Popular music's continually intensifying subsumption into the market system also impeded the development of what Frederic Jameson (1991) calls novel

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cultural "style"; the industry's mechanisms and distribution systems pressure musicians to emulate the stylistic markers of already-existing music, which had been demonstrated to sell reliably. As both Jameson (1991) and Fisher (2009, 2014) argue, the production of cultural objects by artists aimed towards capitalist ends tends to favor nostalgia over newness, as the familiar is more marketable than the radically new. As such, cultural objects produced by modern artists often fail to properly represent the present time as unique, thereby struggling to help those observing the art to locate themselves within the present's problems and strive for change towards something better. Below, I suggest that the emergence of technofeudal platforms intensifies commodification mechanisms, as cultural production is not only subjected to more general commodifying market pressures, but towards the specific pressures of one or another platform. Streaming services, social media, and digital marketplaces all favor certain kinds of "content," pushing artists to chase trends and algorithmic tendencies during cultural production that lead to success on these platforms (Hogan 2017; Ulvaeus 2021), often at the expense of creative or expressive dimensions of artistic work.

In the article's second section, I explore the economics of professional musicianship on technofeudal platforms, whose structures present serious challenges to smaller or independent artists.[4] These platforms fail to deliver on the initial notion of the internet as a utopian method of diversifying music culture, purported to ease the distribution of music for lesser-known musicians. Increased marketization of music has led to the appropriation of its earning potentials by streaming services, as 2000s digital music piracy on platforms like Napster and LimeWire initiated the move of music distribution to digital spaces subsequently formalized and marketized by companies such as Spotify, Amazon, and Apple (Coelho and Mendes 2019). Streaming platforms, all of which Varoufakis (2023) would identify as technofeudal "fiefs," pay most artists very little (Drott 2024), making it difficult for musicians to earn an adequate living from recorded music. As I argue below, music streaming platforms have redefined the operating conditions of professional musicianship, as streaming metrics can provide the basis for further promotion within the music industry, including festival and touring success and lucrative play on terrestrial and satellite radio (Eliezer 2024; Raine 2022; Sahunta 2019). Considering the abysmal compensation of artists on streaming platforms, small independent artists today play the role of Varoufakis' cloud serf; the production of recorded music is necessary to promote artists' live performances, and to generate

metrics to commercially validate artists' work, but generates little-to-no income through streaming (Drott 2024). An "economics of superstars" (Rosen 1981, 845) persists on streaming platforms, where the most well-known artists garner a large proportion of recorded music revenue. I argue, then, that the conventions of digital platforms—spaces developed and guided to serve the ends of elite platform owners—reinforce a popular culture defined and directed by a select few musical voices, who offer broadly marketable music over more subversive offerings (McDonald 2024). The current digital model of popular culture distribution thus fails to deliver on the early-internet's promise that it would, through globalized access, provide fertile ground for the proliferation of esoteric, marginal, and non-normative music as well as subvert the longstanding dominance of superstars in popular culture.

Despite these mechanisms, a plethora of still-subversive artists and musical works, both in online and local settings, remain. So too do potential models for the distribution of this music, through both the internet and human contact. In the article's closing section, I contemplate how music educators might work with students to lessen corporate digital platforms' control over how we listen to, explore, and discover music. Expanding on my previous work surrounding anti-capitalist music education (Stuart-Hitchcox 2025), I consider potentials for renewing transgressive or counter-cultural *anti-technofeudalist* listening in music education. Exploring streaming services with our students can help to dispel the "realism" (Fisher 2009) of music distribution and consumption; that is, the tendency to take commercial streaming platforms as the de-facto way of exploring and listening to music and allow these platforms to subconsciously act upon our tastes. In response, I suggest subversive classroom engagements that discover and cultivate alternative approaches to listening to, exploring, and engaging with music.

Before presenting my broader argument, I make two necessary clarifications. First, I tackle "big ideas" in culture, politics, and human organization, and these discussions are slippery, involving much of contemporary life. The technological elites' startlingly broad consolidation of global (and cyberspatial) power impacts humans globally on both conscious and subconscious levels (Varoufakis 2023). While sketching the broader atmosphere of life under digital capitalism necessitates generalizations, I aim not to over-generalize by providing examples situated in specific contexts.

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Second, discussing cultural production necessitates explaining what I mean by "cultural production," "culture," and "popular culture." I choose to use "cultural production" to follow Gaztambide-Fernández's (2020) thinking that "the term cultural production suggests that "culture" is not a given, but rather a constantly evolving process through which meanings are both conveyed and constructed as people interact within localities, negotiating the material and symbolic orders and rules of engagement that define each context and, indeed, each life" (11). That is to say that "cultural production" represents the continual process of constructing meaning through the creation of cultural objects, which together come to constitute "cultures" or "ways of life" (6). In the internet age, culture and life are not only constituted by actual physical localities but also digital spaces, which are both individualized by the algorithmic curation of distinct "feeds" for each person (Varoufakis 2023) and globalized through the ability for the internet to connect people from far away through similarities and patterns (McDonald 2024). As such, I use the term "popular culture" not to advance the notion of a *singular* popular culture, but rather to reference the media distribution systems that popularize cultural objects and distribute them throughout the world. Today's popular culture is a mode of production that emerges from the local contexts of cultural producers and jumps, via distribution systems, into the subjectivities of individuals connected through social media apps and, critical for this discussion, streaming platforms.

Music Production Under Neoliberalism and Technofeudalism

Cultural production operates within the bounds of broader geopolitical systems, as the makers of culture are subject to the living conditions of their times and places. Understanding issues in culture thus necessitates understanding broader social and political climates. Here, I explore how late neoliberal capitalism and technofeudalism relate to musical cultural production. Neoliberal capitalism (or "neoliberalism"), a form of globalized capitalism which became globally prevalent in policy making in the early 1980's and continues up until present day, has advanced a way of living that conceptualizes human beings primarily as individual entrepreneurs, competing against each other on the supposedly open market and earning their ways as individuals. Neoliberal reformers, such as Ronald Reagan in the U.S., Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and Brian Mulroney in Canada, undercut and scrapped social programs in favor of the privatization (Harvey 2005),

leading to a focus on entrepreneurial competition instead of more collective or cooperative forms of social organization. Public educators experience neoliberalism manifested through, for example, public funding issues, diversion of public funds to private schools, privatization within public schools, standardized testing, and increasing audit culture in public schooling (Apple 2006; Ball 2003; Powell 2023; Winton 2022; Stuart-Hitchcox 2025). Beyond the school, neoliberalism's dismantling of the social safety net has had other implications, including reduced societal protections for the vulnerable, changes to taxation and legislation that allow for elites to retain disproportionate amounts of wealth (Harvey 2005), and the broad "conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise" (Brown 2015, 28). Neoliberalism has obvious impacts on the production of music, both because social support has (to some extent) protected musicians in positions of economic precarity and because musicians increasingly conceptualize their work as primarily entrepreneurial.

Though popular music production has always had a commercial dimension, under neoliberalism it has become increasingly conceived as first-and-foremost a for-profit endeavor, fixated on monetization and marketability over representative, innovative, or political ends. Mark Fisher (2009) explains that the "power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its 'system of equivalence' which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or *Das Kapital*, a monetary value" (4). Jameson (1991) argues that the integration of cultural production into the broader process of commodity production has seriously hindered popular culture's ability to represent the problems of the world. Art, he argues, has in the past been positioned as a semi-autonomous entity, capable of critiquing societal troubles and thus potentially improving society by provoking resistance or raising citizen awareness.

Commercialization and commodification subordinate art to its commodity function, as it is consequentially primarily conceptualized as a product to be sold. In commercialized art, Jameson (1991) argues that artists replace individual style—or the expression of oneself, one's situation, or a perceived condition or affect conveyed through unique or distinct aesthetics—with the repeated presentation of codes, stylistic callbacks to previous aesthetic forms that are commercially reliable due to their familiarity. For example, John Mayer's 2021 album *Sob Rock* exemplifies the aesthetics of 1980's rock, using familiar synthesizer tones and sonic

imprints, and pairing these sonic codes with visual codes, such as marketing campaigns, videos, and album artwork emulating this era. This leads to a waning of what Jameson (1991) calls "historicity" within popular culture; there is no longer a sense that cultural entities belong to a historical moment or make comment on the present situation with novel style. Instead, popular culture often presents as a bizarre articulation of intermingled nostalgic cultural markers, gesturing to one or another time or place but not belonging to any of them; this is perhaps best exemplified by "sequel" culture, as today we see past aesthetic trends and intellectual properties (e.g., recycled fashion trends, songs remade in other genres, endless movie sequels, reboots) repeatedly reemerging in the cultural zeitgeist.

Neoliberal critiques of cultural production provide a useful framework for examining the modern day, as neoliberalism continues to act on cultural production. However, the emergence of digital culture distribution platforms marks a fundamental shift in the process of cultural production, and thus requires a more contemporary framing beyond traditional neoliberal critique. As Varoufakis (2023) explains, part of the current issue is the complete autonomy that platform owners and developers hold over the structures and functions of their platforms. On these platforms, "everything is intermediated not by the disinterested invisible hand of the market but by an algorithm that works for [the platform owner's] bottom line" (89). These platforms also have autonomy over their own user interfaces, foreclosing and dictating the ways that both "content creators" (including musical artists) and "consumers" can engage with one another. The foreclosed nature of these platforms has transformed the modalities of commercialized music production, turning music making away from more generalized marketization. Instead, musical cultural production now concentrates on compliance and compatibility with platform conventions. Streaming is now the default mode for the distribution and consumption of recorded music, with 78% of people listening to music via a streaming service (Duarte 2025), replacing past forms of music sale, including physical media (records, cassettes, CDs) and even the purchase of digital media on platforms like iTunes (McDonald 2024, 18). Listeners now pay a sort of "cloud rent" (Varoufakis 2023, 133) for their access to music, instead of buying it, and the rental fees paid for access to music go to one or another music streaming platform, the largest ones being Spotify, Apple Music, and Amazon Music. In the next section of this article, I examine the economics of these platforms, which make the livelihoods of artists broadly unsustainable. For now, however, I detail how these platforms influence

cultural production and the music itself, as musicians anticipate and tailor their production of music to the platforms upon which that music will be hosted.

Rather than subordinating art to a generalized commodity function on an "open market," technofeudal platforms steer the production of music towards specific platform characteristics, interfaces, and algorithmic preferences. The developed conventions of streaming platforms influence artists' approaches to the production of music not only because their music will be consumed on these platforms, but because success on these platforms is critical when being assessed by the broader industry. A study by music industry analytic company Viberate surveyed 125 music industry professionals, including label managers and A&R representatives, and found that they almost ubiquitously rely on Spotify for artist discovery and talent scouting—just 4% of respondents said they could go without Spotify in their day-to-day music discovery work (Gorenc Z 2024). As a bassist in the Canadian music industry over the last decade, I can say with confidence that this squares with my experience; the artists I work with are acutely aware of the importance of accommodating the conventions, regulations, and formatting peculiarities of these platforms, and this influences decisions made when songwriting, arranging, recording, editing, mixing, mastering, and distributing music.

Pitchfork's Marc Hogan (2017) notes, in speaking to several industry professionals, that the prominence of streaming platforms fundamentally changes "how hits are made" (para. 3). He writes that with "tens of millions of songs just a few taps away, artists must compete or be skipped. The unprecedented wealth of data that streaming services use to curate their increasingly influential playlists gives the industry real-time feedback on what is working, but this instant data-fication in turn risks feeding back on itself. While streaming has undoubtedly coincided with a shift in the pop charts away from the caffeinated bravado of several years ago, streaming-era hits appear to be as rigidly defined and formulaic as ever—if not more so" (para. 6). One example explored by Hogan (2017)—and also former Spotify data scientist Glenn McDonald (2024)—is how rigid platform definitions of what counts as a "play" can affect the production processes of songs. On Spotify, for example, to register that a user has listened to a song, the user needs to listen to that song for at least thirty seconds. If the user skips to another song before this threshold, the artist—and songwriter, producer, musicians, etc.—receive no compensation for the play, and the listen does not add to the song's play count. If this happens repeatedly, Spotify's recommendation algorithm registers the song as

having a high skip rate and pushes it to fewer users (Allen 2025). As a result, the initial parts of a song begin to resemble an "executive summary" (Hogan 2017), where all notable portions of the song are pitched to the listener, in hopes of garnering their attention and converting this attention into at least thirty seconds of play.

To provide another example, the music genre in which I work has one or two "editorial playlists"[5] on each primary streaming service, and these playlists provide artists not only with a large portion of their streams, but also with the cultural capital to seek radio play, record deals, and the like. I have noticed that, during songwriting and production, being picked for these playlists informs the creative process. Recording artists contemplate music that will fit well with the "playlist pitch" form of the Spotify for Artists interface (Spotify 2025), try to make songs coherent with Spotify's predetermined "tags,"[6] and use similar aesthetic markers to those of already-featured artists. Artists often listen to playlists they want to be featured on, sampling what is being "picked up" and modeling their songs accordingly. Artists also sometimes send platform-employed playlist curators (generally well-known members of the industry) samples of unreleased recorded music for opinions, using these opinions to help make their release decisions. Oftentimes, songs that receive negative feedback from these gatekeepers can then be seen as "dead"—if the digital industry will not adopt them, they are regarded as not being worth release expenses, despite the costs already incurred during recording. In my experience, these factors begin to undergird and even govern the way artists make their music, having a profound impact on the resulting culture.

The challenges with becoming reliant on and subservient to the mechanisms of a platform are mostly obvious; the creative process is subordinated to a commercial one, and writing and recording are steered by perceived demands of streaming services. As such, the process of cultural production no longer serves the core goal of creating a piece of expressive or representative culture, or even the somewhat cynical objective of appealing to the broad commercial criteria of the market, but rather aims at catering to the mechanisms of these specific platforms. And, frustratingly, platform rules are fickle; platforms regularly modify their algorithms, compensation models, and methods of curation, and changes are not transparently communicated to artists, so producing culture that appeals to these platforms can feel like trying to hit an invisible moving target. In fact, I have noticed this in my research for this article—even sourcing hard evidence for how platforms

function, which models or approaches benefit artists, and how streaming affects the rest of an artist's career are increasingly opaque, as these systems are "black boxes."

Additionally, industry professionals rarely give transparent perspectives on exactly how these platforms affect the rest of the music business. Of course, and as I discuss below, popular music does not account for the entire music culture space—far from it. However, since "about 80% of recorded music revenues come from streaming" (Curry 2025, para. 10), the effects these services have on cultural production necessitate attention.

Economic Realities for Musicians in the Platform Age, and the Persistence of the Economics of Superstars

Using Varoufakis' *Technofeudalism* (2023) as its theoretical lens, I now consider the economic implications of technofeudal streaming platforms on the lives of working musicians and recording artists.[7] While reading *Technofeudalism* (2023), I was initially frustrated that Varoufakis shied away from digging into the mechanics of music streaming. He makes mention of these platforms several times, but when getting into the specificity of his feudal metaphor, he usually defaults to either a social media site or a digital marketplace, perhaps because music streaming does not fit his metaphor as cleanly as other available examples. Examining the specific roles of different agents on music streaming platforms, the metaphor strains under the unique attributes of the music industry. I think this is primarily because recorded music has been partially decommodified,[8] through its dematerialization and subsequent piracy in digital spaces (Drott 2024).

When looking at Amazon's digital marketplace, for example, Varoufakis' metaphor works quite neatly. Jeff Bezos (Amazon's "cloudalist" and largest shareholder) has a great deal of autonomy over Amazon's online marketplace, in addition to its streaming services and smart home implements that listen to conversations and collect data. "Serf" users of the Amazon platform contribute their personal data to the company for free, through both browsing and recordings of their speech taken by Amazon's smart speakers, allowing Amazon to optimize algorithms on the platform and better advertise products to said users (Iqbal et al. 2023). Amazon's warehouse workers, who face famously hostile working conditions and countless instances of union-busting (Logan 2025), keep the company

running whilst receiving a low share of company profits. And "vassal" sellers on Amazon's digital marketplace can profit off of users whilst still paying Amazon a share of their profits, which varies based on item category and shipping/storage approaches (Amazon.com 2025). On first glance, Spotify appears similar; Daniel Ek, founder, CEO, and majority shareholder of Spotify retains a great deal of autonomy over the platform and governs how it functions. Most user "serfs" of the platform pay to use it, while contributing their personal data to Spotify, which former Spotify "Data Alchemist" Glenn McDonald (2024) admits is a form of "surveillance capitalism" (18). However, the metaphor runs into trouble with the recording artists themselves, particularly smaller, independent artists, in precarious positions, who hardly meet the designation of "vassal."

Understanding the slight incompatibilities with Varoufakis' metaphor necessitates examining how streaming platforms compensate musicians, songwriters, and record labels. Streaming services are either subscription services (where users pay for monthly access to a service's catalog) or free-with-advertising services, rather than using pay-per-song or pay-per-stream models, which users find unpalatable because of the still-existing alternative of music piracy. Unlike an Amazon product, a song play is not compensated at a flat-rate purchase price, with platform fees for hosting or a percentage paid to the platform for each listen. Instead, the total revenue on a streaming service—including advertising and subscription fees—is divided monthly at roughly a 58.33:11.67:30 rate between music distributors, music publishers, and the host platform, respectively (McDonald 2024). Music distributors include both independent distributors and large labels. In the case of an independent artist, distributor royalties would largely go to the artist, as distribution companies who simply upload music to platforms on an independent artist's behalf charge relatively low fees. For labels, this division of royalties is based on record deal agreements between the label and artist themselves; though this number varies drastically, the label often takes between 50% and 90% of revenue (Soundeon 2018). Similarly, the 11.67% distributed to a publisher would be paid either directly to songwriters, or in the case of songwriters working for a publishing company, to their publishing company and distributed according to their publishing deal. The approximately 70% of total platform revenue paid to the distributor and publisher combined (58.33%+11.67%=70%) is divided per-stream per-subscription-type, meaning that, for example, 70% of the money paid for all regular-priced American Spotify subscriptions is then divided into chunks based on total

listens across all users with that subscription type. If the total subscription fee paid for a type of subscription in a month was $1 million, and a song accounted for 0.1% of all listens on that subscription type, that song would be paid $700 in royalties for the month for that subscription type (70% of 0.1% of $1 million), divided into $583.3 (58.33%) for the distribution and $116.7 (11.67%) for the publishing. So, if an artist was fully independent, and had written and released that song all by themselves, they could expect to receive almost all of that $700 in royalties for that song that month, in addition to the same split process for all other subscription types that listened to the song.

Given this pay structure, one might instinctively categorize the artist as a "vassal"; they sell the ability to listen to their music to users on streaming platforms, much like a marketplace seller on amazon.com, and profit according to the number of streams. However, replacing the imaginary numbers used above with the revenues artists actually see from music streaming reveals that most artists do not profit off the digital distribution of their music, as the costs of production overwhelmingly outstrip the likely returns on investment. As Drott (2024) explains,

> on average the typical royalty earned per stream ranges somewhere between $0.004 and $0.01. To be sure, such micropayments can add up over time. Particularly for older, established artists, or those in possession of large music catalogs (two variables that often go hand in hand), streaming payments can amount to meaningful income. By the same token, however, those in possession of the largest catalogs—namely, major labels and publishers—will be the biggest beneficiaries of the streaming model. For younger, less established musicians, or those working on the margins of the mainstream music industry, the situation couldn't be more different. A representative survey of UK musicians conducted in December 2020 indicates that 80 percent of music creators earn less than £200 ($264) per annum from streaming. (3–4)

In terms of Varoufakis' metaphor, if all goes exceedingly well, then the musician is a "vassal" salesperson of their music, but in more cases, the recording artist resembles something closer to a "prole" or "serf," receiving compensation from streaming that fails to recover the initial costs of recording. This phenomenon mirrors the practice of "playing for exposure," where artists perform live for inadequate compensation to garner public attention.

The mechanics behind poor streaming compensation for smaller independent musicians generally involves detailing two issues: 1) how platforms distribute royalties, and 2) a low total amount of royalties distributed. First, since all plays per subscription type are pooled into a central pool (this is called a *pro-rata*

distribution model), artists are not compensated proportionally to the listening habits of their fans, but rather proportionally to the aggregate of all listening across all users. Critics of this model advocate for a *user-centric distribution* model (Drott 2024), where the royalty portion of each subscription fee is distributed proportionally to the individual listening activity of that specific user.[9] However, as both Drott (2024) and McDonald (2024) note, the actual efficacy of this sort of distribution model is unclear; if enthusiast listeners who listen to a broad selection of music also listen to less popular music (a hypothesis that seems plausible), a user-centric distribution model could actually lead to more infrequent listeners contributing their entire subscription fees to large artists and more discerning listeners dividing their listening fees across multiple artists, leading to niche artists being paid even less. Solving the problem of low stream compensation through changing the allocation of the existing royalty pool could thus be difficult or altogether impossible, without shifting to a sort of socialist distribution model that actively and intentionally redistributes streaming wealth from popular artists to less popular artists. Since major artists and labels would find this type of model unpalatable, it is unlikely existing platforms will adopt it.

Second, streaming platforms pay music royalties as a split of subscription costs. Historically, the low prices of monthly subscriptions to these services (often around $10 per month) have been insufficient to adequately fund either musicians or the services themselves (Ulvaeus 2021). Drott (2024) notes that larger corporate entities with streaming services (such as Amazon or Apple) often view streaming services as a loss leader[10] and subsidize them with profits from other parts of their businesses. This forces dedicated music streaming companies like Spotify to compete with these prices, and as a result, they have historically not been profitable, either; Spotify reported fifteen years of straight losses before its first profitable year in 2024 (Tafradzhiyski 2025). Drott (2024) explains that "such difficulties have generally been resolved via periodic infusions of capital from investors, [or] acquisition[s] by some larger concern" (82). Simply put, the low user cost of these platforms and their function as loss leaders causes a partial decommodification of recorded music. In addition, Spotify recently found a nefarious way of increasing margins, which centers on using a legal loophole to pay lower royalty rates to artists in the U.S. In 2024, Spotify increased subscription prices marginally to "bundle" audiobooks into their music listening subscriptions. The increase in price was not actually the core goal of this manoeuvre; instead, the addition of audiobooks

changed their royalty regulations, as in the U.S. "bundled" services legally call for a lower mechanical royalty rate paid to musicians, labels, and publishers, thus saving Spotify money and increasing the company's margins (Bunales 2024; Millman 2025).

Whether caused by inadequate distribution schemes or a low total income distributed (or, more likely, both), streaming revenues remain low for smaller independent or local musicians. However, high-popularity musicians, often called "superstars," continue to generate massive revenue from streaming. This is consistent with the longstanding "economics of superstars… wherein relatively small numbers of people earn enormous amounts of money and dominate the activities in which they engage" (845). The emergence of the internet and its digital "dematerialization of music" (Coelho and Mendes 2019, 454) initially promised a potential for the distribution of music culture in more esoteric, community-based manners, disrupting the hegemonic dominance of large record labels and radio distribution and allowing a more uniform distribution of listenership and associated revenues. These systems have not played out as hoped; Blake (2020) notes that 90% of streams in the digital age have gone to the top 1% of artists, in fact increasing wealth inequality in the recording industry when compared to physical recording sales. Spotify's (2023) announcement that in 2024 any song receiving fewer than 1000 streams in a calendar year would no longer generate recorded royalties, and that this revenue would be redistributed to artists with more streams, worsened these inequities.

The inequity in play (and pay) between superstars and smaller artists is concerning for several reasons. The obvious ones surround the basic issue of wealth inequality: the current system contributes to disproportionate qualities of life between artists, as a select few artists with widespread popularity can live very comfortably, while most artists must seek alternative revenue sources to meet cost of living. The many music recording workers who support these artists, including songwriters, producers, session musicians, mixing and mastering engineers, videographers, and photographers also face increased precarity, as artists no longer have the revenue to employ these people in service of their work, and labels tend to employ a small core team of professionals who work across all label artists. Music industry workers are, at a base level, deserving of the necessities of a quality life, and at present this is often not the case.

I have little faith that the solution to these core problems with the livelihoods of today's musicians lies in tweaking the streaming compensation formula. McDonald (2024) states, "Neoliberal capitalism … doesn't give music the economic support it humanely deserves, but that's because it doesn't make humane decisions. It makes market decisions, and those are not driven by social goals or moral truths, they're driven by the unplanned and unforeseen interactions of micromotives and macrobehavior" (113). The streaming era is emblematic of capitalism's stratification of wealth, technofeudalism's appropriation of information distribution, and the shifting of conventional marketplaces onto controlled and contained platforms. Economically, the way out of this sort of arrangement relies on new forms of political organization that take problems of wealth inequality and accompanying systems of wealth distribution more seriously. Approaches to broad-scale societal wealth redistribution are well beyond the scope of this article.

However, returning to cultural production, I am concerned about how streaming platforms' disproportionate stratification of attention towards "superstars" over other artists might impact the proliferation of culture, and consequently, conceptions of the world. I want to call into question the governance of music distribution by streaming CEOs, engineered user interfaces, and recommendation algorithms, which limits the abilities of musicians and listeners to represent and make meaning in the world through recorded music. If artists' successes on streaming platforms are contingent on them producing content favored by the formatting of these platforms, the tendencies of their algorithms, and the tastes of their gatekeeping playlist curators, this pressure will inevitably have significant impact on the actual production of music recordings, as artists bend messaging and formatting towards the proclivities of these spaces. As such, the current system prevents certain worldviews from being heard. Returning to Varoufakis' (2023) metaphor, in the context of music streaming, the "cloudalist" platform owner gets to determine the distinction between the musical "vassal" and the musical "serf," and thus chooses the prominent cultural voices, picks the sorts of objects that receive widespread attention, and shapes cultural conceptualizations of meaning. This control over music culture has the power to influence the subjectivities not only of artists, but of music listeners, who turn to music to help make sense of the world.

Music Education, "Streaming Realism," and Anti-Technofeudal Listening

I close this article by positing potential music education interventions against technofeudal streaming platforms, problematizing streaming platforms and searching alongside students for less compromised methods of listening and exploration. [11] Specifically, I propose engaging students in a critical examination of streaming services, with the aim of unsettling their taken-for-granted dominance in everyday listening practices, a sedimentation which has consequential impacts on popular culture. I also propose pedagogical engagements exploring alternative modalities of music listening outside of technofeudal streaming platforms. As I detail below, alternative modalities of music listening worth exploring include, for example, more esoteric or creative digital spaces, physical places, social arrangements, and live music settings.[12] Teaching alternative listening approaches offers a disruptive intervention against the perception that streaming music through technofeudal platforms is the inevitable "reality" of music listening.

These pedagogy practices align with an attitude of "techno-skepticism" (González Ben and Mullen 2025) toward emerging digital technologies, which exist in overwhelmingly capitalistic spaces. The modalities by which students listen to music impact their fundamental relationship with music, because listening to music forms our conceptions of what music "is" and influences choices around the music we choose to make. Educators must acknowledge the influence of digital capitalist music listening spaces on music students, whilst also working to actively highlight and resist the shortcomings and difficulties of these spaces. Uncritically presenting streaming platforms in music classes would leave music educators "complicit in implementing technology that subordinates the human and musical needs of students to modes of production that benefit a highly commercial society" (Benedict and O'Leary 2019, 28). Conversely, it is the responsibility of educators to underscore that commercial music listening services, often framed as "tools," are not neutral by virtue of being a tool, but instead that "all tools are inherently biased in design and construction" (Benedict and O'Leary 2019, 29), and that streaming services hold specific biases towards the ends of platform owners and music industry stakeholders. Acknowledging and working through these biases is critical to a responsible music pedagogy rooted in our time and place. As Mantie (2017) explains, "As educators, we have no choice but to be in the world.... failing to provide our

students with critical tools that might allow them to better negotiate different the modalities of musicality made possible by various technologies would seem to make us professionally negligent as educators" (26). Though I understand the appeal of daydreams about regressing to pre-digital (or at least pre-technofeudal) times, nostalgia is not a solution. The nostalgic pining for pre-digital times erases that these times, whilst better in some ways, were also host to intense prejudice; as written by Fisher (2014), "In the 1970's, certainly, culture was opened up to working-class inventiveness in a way that is now scarcely imaginable to us; but this was also a time when casual racism, sexism and homophobia were routine features of the mainstream" (21). Instead, it is our responsibility as educators to live in the present, recognizing the unique dynamics of our time and our world without accepting these dynamics as inevitable, static "realities." In response, we need to cultivate alternative possibilities, both for ourselves and our students.

Critical to cultivating alternative possibilities is an understanding that our perceptions of what might be possible are often governed by our awareness of viable alternatives. In *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher (2009) explores the differences in perceptions of political possibility between those born before and after the fall of the Soviet Union, writing: "A whole generation has passed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall.... For most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable. Jameson used to report in horror about the ways that capitalism had seeped into the very unconscious; now, the fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment" (8–9). I witness a similar generational gap in my students today concerning listening modalities; while I grew up in the CD era, carrying a booklet of beloved discs in my backpack for portable listening, many of my students are too young to remember any practical association between music listening and physical media. Much like, as explained by Fisher, capitalism asserts that it is the only surviving "realistic" political arrangement, my students often conflate streaming service listening with the general practice of music listening; Spotify *is* music discovery, editorial playlists *are* how music is structured, grouped, and curated, and so on. As such, dismantling "streaming realism"—or a default reliance on these platforms—involves, as Fisher (2009) advocates, keying in on ways that these platforms are fooling us or failing us and exploring alternative methods

of listening that reveal streaming platforms not as de-facto ways of listening, but as mediated spaces that orient listening towards specific ends.

This approach has been explored previously in music education. Powell (2023) advocates for the use of music education modalities outside of current configurations overwhelmingly oriented towards practices of competition, a phenomenon he terms "competitive realism" (19), under which he argues it has "become impossible to imagine alternatives to the competitive structures that undergird so many music programs" (22). Adapting the approaches advocated for by Fisher, Powell (2023) argues that music education scholars and educators need to "work to undermine the position of competitive realism as a 'natural' state of affairs with no realistic alternative" (36) by seeking out ways of teaching music outside of competitive paradigms. Below, I advocate for a similar intervention, adapting Fisher's thinking in the context of music streaming, aiming to 1) undermine the perception of streaming as the natural state-of-affairs, and 2) present alternative modalities of listening that can better serve students.

Undermining the "Realism" of Streaming Services

I advocate for first addressing the streaming problematic in music education through a direct and critical classroom exploration of prominent streaming platforms, perhaps in a study unit. This unit, which I am provisionally calling "Interrogating Digital Music Listening," would examine and make explicit the architectures of streaming services. The unit would begin with a class discussion exploring the main ways that students listen to music and their feelings about these approaches. As educators, we must acknowledge that students likely already engage in the processes of music exploration, curation, listening, and critique, and that, as digital natives, they come to any sort of conversation around streaming or digitality with established positionalities. To undertake critical work, music educators need to honor these positionalities, taking seriously the existing standpoints of students. At the same time, however, as Benedict and O'Leary (2019) caution, "notions of nativeness with digital technology often falsely equate technology use with depth of understanding" (37).

Classroom work would aim to deepen students' understandings about streaming platforms, exploring how they manipulate both listeners and producers of culture. Following the opening discussion, the study unit would critically examine both how streaming platforms are oriented towards capitalistic ends and how they

influence musicians' lives and creative processes. Keeping in mind that "the growing reliance on algorithmic recommendations for discovering new music means that these algorithms can influence our preferences" (Matrosova 2024, 19), this unit would also examine how algorithms steer listening on streaming platforms. Without careful consideration, methods of consumption often present as passive "realities," acting upon us without our explicit awareness. Interrogating these platforms helps to show students that their interactions with streaming services are neither inevitable nor neutral, but rather mediated and designed experiences oriented towards specific ends.

As an example, consciously interrogating platform user interfaces can demonstrate how platforms influence one's discovery of music. Platforms recommend specific categories of music, present suggestions for artists that users might enjoy, and algorithmically select upcoming songs to follow previous choices. In an assignment, music educators might ask students to choose a streaming service and examine how the service's interfaces act upon them, encouraging certain choices or actions whilst discouraging or disallowing others. Students could explore how/why their service of choice's interface features certain artists over others and consider the impacts that recommendation systems have on their own agency to explore and choose the music they listen to. Interfaces often show the "play counts" of each song, and teachers and students might both explore the massive discrepancies in listenership between artists and critically examine the ways that listenership varies between different modalities of music. Explorations of play counts also lead naturally to discussions of compensation models and clearer understandings of the material difficulties facing many artists on these platforms.

Making conscious the manipulative tendencies of streaming platforms through classroom engagements would help students to use platforms more critically. These examinations of platforms could be supplemented by watching interviews with artists, songwriters, and producers who explain the impacts of streaming on their own livelihoods. This initial problematizing of platforms, however, calls for a follow up: Sure, streaming is deeply flawed and problematic, but if not conventional commercial streaming platforms, then what? Is there an alternative?

Alternative Listening Modalities

Classroom explorations of modern listening modalities cannot only be oriented towards critiques of the current situation; they must also offer some promise of

worthwhile, exciting, and *realistic* alternatives. Many students are already aware of pitfalls of for-profit streaming systems; bad artist compensation, algorithmic manipulation of preferences, and "echo chambers" are established issues in the public consciousness. Student often already feel that "Spotify is bad." However, problematizing streaming is by itself an inadequate intervention to disrupt its "realistic" dominance of listening practices because, as evidenced by our current state-of-affairs, capitalist practices can be obviously detrimental or oppressive whilst still feeling inevitable. Instead, as Fisher (2009) explains, "Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible 'realism' turns out to be nothing of the sort" 16). To this effect, I posit a second study unit, provisionally titled "Listening Differently," aimed at disarming the perceived "realism" of streaming by providing alternatives. Below, I present several modalities that could be explored, including music discovery in 1) alternative digital spaces, 2) physical places, 3) social arrangements, and 4) live music settings.

While most of this article has focused on problematizing capitalist digital spaces, *digitality* is not inherently "bad." In class, teachers and students can explore subversive digital spaces that gesture towards "a world in which all the marvels of communicative technology could be combined with a sense of solidarity" (Fisher 2014, 33). Extending students' everyday digital listening experiences, teachers can encourage them to "experience the music and/or the technology in new ways or in ways in which they wouldn't ordinarily experience it" (Rinsema 2017, 131). For example, Glenn McDonald's *everynoise.com*, which he built in his spare time while working for Spotify, uses algorithms to present thousands of subgenres of music listening, organized on a Y axis of "mechanism" and an X axis of "bounciness." The site allows users to explore music in a wandering fashion, tempting users to find esoteric, unpopular, and non-normative genres for listening, which might disrupt their conceptions and preconceived notions of music. McDonald (2024) explains that the site was created with much different goals than the Spotify interface (which he worked on in his "day job"): "Everynoise.com… is where I put the tools and analyses and alternate views of the music universe that aren't proprietary, that didn't try to solve tactical Spotify business problems so much as they attempted to give the music world back the insights and emergent self-organization that its collective music-making and music-listening produces" (105). Ironically, *everynoise.com* is now in an operational but static state, as

McDonald was laid off from Spotify and his site lost access to internal data needed to update.

Even still, examining this site—among other online places for music curation—helps students to see that the internet can still host convention-breaking ways of looking for new musics. A classroom activity could have students break off into groups, playing around with the site for a half hour and sharing non-normative (provocative, moving, surprising, unfamiliar etc.) songs they found in their explorations. Other examples of possible sites for music exploration include music-map.com (a minimalist site that associates various musicians with others in a flowing, visual manner), theglobaljukebox.org (a meticulously designed site that allows exploration of musics globally as well as exploration by culture, language, decade, and countless other formats), and radio.garden (a site that allows easy access to countless radio stations across the globe). Students could be given an assignment to find an alternative digital music listening space (not including the main streaming services) and present their space briefly to the class. These sorts of assignments help students to find real alternative approaches to digital music listening, disrupting the "realism" of streaming sites and their algorithms as the dominant method for digital music discovery.

Beyond the digital, students could be given a listening assignment tied to physical media and/or physical spaces. Many libraries still hold collections of CDs, cassettes, and vinyl, and even the systems (record/CD players, etc.) required to listen to these pieces of physical media. Students could be asked to go to a local library and pick a recording they had not heard before, based on the attractiveness of the album cover or something interesting in the liner notes, and then give a review of the album from their perspective. Many libraries stock local artists in their collections, and students could encounter a less prominent or unexpectedly interesting nearby musician. A class could take a field trip to an independent record store, discussing the distribution of physical media and the ways that these shops function with shop owners or employees. Further, students could visit a college or university radio station, examining the workings of terrestrial radio. School radio stations use student programming and sometimes have proclivities for "weird" music, much of which is not commercially successful. Students could discuss the exploration of music with college deejays and garner further insight on how they might discover new music.

Like many, I have largely experienced the exploration of music as a social phenomenon, and much of my favourite music was discovered upon recommendation from my "tastemaker" friends. Algorithmic recommendation systems inevitably individualize listening tastes, as they are tailor-made to the listening patterns of individual users. The social discovery of music functions as a rather disruptive alternative to this trend, as it is constituted in the unpredictable relation between people with different experiences, backgrounds, and tastes. Students could be asked to find a member of their family or community with a collection (big or small) of physical music media and explore it based on curation from their acquaintance, reporting back on some of their favourite "finds." Students could also be asked to partner and share/discuss music they enjoy with each other, subsequently presenting on each other's musical tastes, sharing similarities, differences, disagreements, and new artists, songs, or albums that they enjoyed. Modelling music discovery based on sociality helps to extricate curation from the smooth connective pathways of recommendation algorithms, instead situating this process in messy, unpredictable human relation.

Further, local live music listening assignments might also help students to better connect with local music communities and their situatedness within their contexts. For example, music educators might ask students to check the live music schedules of local music venues and attend a local concert. Students could also consult bandcamp.com (a digital music marketplace that is oriented towards better treatment and compensation of artists), which has a filter on their discover page[13] that facilitates searching for artists by location, curating potential independent musicians with affordable local performances. Student would then be asked to attend a concert of interest to them. Attending live music performances disrupts another "realism" of digital listening; in the modern era, listeners often conflate music listening and recorded music, leading to more isolated and polished listening experiences. As discussed by Powell (2023), highly edited recorded music "has contributed to a false sense of perfection to which school music ensembles compare themselves" (25). The attendance of live concerts would help students to connect digital music to *actually existing*, living artists who are members of their own communities.

Alternative digital, physical, social, and live listening modalities are clear, exciting, and realistic alternative methods for music discovery beyond the immediate provision of recorded music through technofeudal streaming platforms.

Highlighting these alternative modalities can open students to thinking differently about their relation to listening and unseat the dominance of streaming services in their listening practices. Alongside a problematizing of streaming platforms, this pedagogical approach presents promise for disrupting the perceived inevitability (or "realism") of listening to music being an activity undertaken, by default, through streaming.

Closing Thoughts

In this article, I explored the ways in which streaming spaces act upon the production of music culture, both because recorded music must now appeal to streaming conventions and because these spaces refigure the economic arrangements involved in professional artistry. To be clear, my intention is not to evince a crotchety attitude towards digitality, the internet, or any number of modern innovations in technology. I am also not implying that popular culture contains no subversive voices; Kendrick Lamar, Jessie Welles, Anderson .Paak, Jason Isbell, Rhiannon Giddens, Snotty Nose Rez Kids, Lady Gaga, and Jeremy Dutcher—among countless others—continue to comment on present conditions and advocate for change in the world. Furthermore, I acknowledge that local artists, though often obscured in the larger digital ecosystem, continue to do subversive work in their local communities. I am also not advocating for a regressive full return to physical media, an abandonment of digital social organization, or any such end goal. And, most importantly, echoing past work from Rinsema (2017) on digital music listening and my own work with many thoughtful and aware music students, I acknowledge the agency that young listeners already employ in digital spaces, by curating playlists, searching for new artists, and exploring music alongside their friends in social manners. These elements of modern music are cause for optimism, hope, and celebration, and merit attention by educators in their own work.

However, in concert with these causes for optimism, I also wish to emphasize a skepticism towards the underlying systems in our streaming platforms, which increasingly govern our tastes, tendencies, and proclivities in music listening. Streaming platforms are not neutral, not simply "tools" for music listening, but rather digital spaces owned and governed by a new ruling class and deployed in deliberate ways to monopolize human attention and desire. As Varoufakis (2023) explains, the advent of technofeudal, cloud-driven power has "developed capacities

that previous types of capital goods never had. It has become at once an attention-holder, a desire-manufacturer, a drive of proletarian labour,… an elicitor of free labour,… and, to boot, the creator of totally privatised digital transaction spaces… in which neither buyers nor sellers enjoy any of the options they would in normal markets" (99). Both the marginalization of smaller artists in these settings and the ways that these settings influence the creative processes of cultural production present serious dangers to culture as a mechanism to make meaning in the world. Left unchecked, these systems can be misidentified as inevitable realities, to which we have no response. We must instead endeavor to illustrate that these spaces are not inevitable, and that there are existing spaces, both on the internet and in the physical world, that present viable, exciting, interesting, and joyful alternatives to this foreclosed method of music exploration. Today's music teachers have a responsibility to attend to the dangers of technofeudal spaces and, alongside students, work towards new ways of being in the digital world that utilize our modern ability to connect, share, and make meaning through music, without surrendering the potentialities to a class of ultra-powerful, ultra-wealthy technofeudal lords.

About the Author

Holt Stuart-Hitchcox is a music educator, musician, and doctoral candidate from Toronto, Canada. He holds a bachelor's degree in music performance from Humber College, an MA in music education from the University of Toronto and is currently pursuing a PhD in education at York University. His scholarship focuses on potentials for music and music education to address the relational, temporal, and cognitive malaises of the modern day, particularly in response to the damaging effects of late capitalism. An active member of the Canadian music performance community, Holt has received four consecutive Bassist of the Year nominations at the Canadian Country Music Awards between 2022 and 2025.

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Notes

[1] I use class-related language in this article, referring to musicians as, for example, "working-class" (meaning that someone is reliant on wage labour and, often, precarious work in the gig economy to cover costs of living) or "lower-income" (meaning that income does not adequately cover cost of living, impacting quality of life).

[2] See endnote 1.

[3] See endnote 1.

[4] The distinction between a "label artist" and an "independent artist" is exceedingly confusing in the music industry and resists a traditional black and white

categorization. Historically, one could think of an artist either as a label artist (represented by a record label) or an independent artist (not represented by a record label), and the associated consequences of these affiliations were clear, as labels had access to gatekeepers and industry connections whilst independents were forced to "go it alone" in these areas. Today, elements of management, including live booking agents, large record labels (who take care of many elements of professional musicianship beyond recorded music), and even "independent record labels" (smaller companies not including Universal, Warner, and Sony), render clear categorizations of artists difficult, as an artist may not be represented by a major label (and thus be categorized as an independent artist) but still receive support (and sacrifice a portion of their profits) through some other form of management. When I discuss say "smaller or independent artists," I am trying to speak towards the demographic of "non-superstars," who do not receive the lion's share of royalties, attention, and the like from streaming platforms.

[5] Editorial playlists are playlists curated by employees of the streaming platform, often featured outwardly on their user interfaces and thus attracting more widespread user attention.

[6] Tags specify, for example, the "mood," "genre," or instrumentation of a song.

[7] To reiterate, Varoufakis details four roles: 1) platform owners ("cloudalists"), who govern all aspects of platforms, 2) users ("serfs"), who contribute their attention and data to the platform for free (or, in the case of subscription platforms, at a cost), 3) workers ("proles"), who keep platforms running at extremely low wages, and 4) platform sellers ("vassals"), who are allowed to profit from users, contingent on them paying a fee to platform owners for their use of the platform as a selling tool. The serf, prole, and vassal are each exploited by the cloudalist in different ways; user serfs essentially contribute their value to the platform for free, proles are exploited in a more traditional owner/labourer arrangement, and platform sellers are forced to accede to the rules of operation on the site, and lose a significant cut of their profits to site owners.

[8] When I say "partially decommodified", I mean that recorded music becomes much more difficult to sell as a commodity when it is fungible (infinitely and easily copyable) and readily available, for free, through illicit music distribution sites. Instead of being the primary product of the music industry, recorded music's fungibility and ease of access today means it must instead be used as a promotional tool to sell concert tickets, merchandise, and other associated goods, which are physical or ephemeral, and non-fungible. Of course, recorded music remains a commodity that can be sold, and one that makes streaming services money, but its sale is less directly responsible for an artist's livelihood today.

[9] In this instance, if a user listened only to one artist for the entire month, their entire subscription fee would go to said artist.

[10] Loss leader: a product sold at a loss to attract customers.

[11] I was initially tempted to conclude by discussing classroom explorations of subversive musics; protest music, experimental music, music specifically oriented towards anti-capitalist/anti-technofeudalist angles, etcetera. One core objective of my article is to emphasize modes of listening and exploration that allow these sorts of musics (and the artists who make them) to flourish. That said, significant work has already been done in this area, with far more depth than would be possible in this conclusion. I would point readers to Juliet Hess' (2019) *Music Education for Social Change: Constructing an Activist Music Education* and the accompanying curriculum document *Constructing an Activist Music Education: A 6–12 Curriculum* (2019) as well as Cathy Benedict's *Music and Social Justice: A Guide for Elementary Educators* (2021) for examples of significant work examining the study of political and activist music in classrooms.

[12] These different sites are obviously not categorically distinct; digital music discovery can also be social, we can find physical media at live shows, etcetera. Instead, I am here suggesting we think about a variety of avenues to explore music, including but not limited to the digital.

[13] See bandcamp.com/discover.