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IN DEFENSE

OF MOVING FROM A MUSIC PRODUCTION CURRICULUM TO A COMMERCIAL MUSIC CURRICULUM

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Key Words *commercial music curriculum, music production curriculum, music technology degree plan, music industry degree plan, entrepreneurship in commercial music practices curriculum, music technology curriculum, music distribution using social media, commercial music production, entrepreneurship in commercial music, live sound, audio recording, music industry practices, musical artistry skills*

Abstract

The music industry has significantly evolved in recent years, largely due to the growth of newer forms of technology, such as distribution platforms and music production tools. With technological changes, academic institutions must understand the need to alter their curricula to better prepare students for the growing field of commercial music. Traditional music education programs emphasized classical music, music theory, and instrumental and vocal skills; however, students wanting to enter the world of commercial music need a broader range of knowledge, including business, marketing, copyright law, self-publishing, and music licensing as well as skills in operating various kinds of hardware and software.

A commercial music degree can help students achieve their career goals by addressing new opportunities and challenges and building a curriculum that can adapt to the changing music industry. Understanding differences between music production and commercial music curricula is a key to developing strategies for exploring how to transform an existing music production into a commercial music degree.

Various technological, economic, and cultural factors have shaped the history of music production education (Dorfman, 2022). The music industry has undergone significant changes in recent years, mainly driven by the rise of digital distribution platforms and the democratization of music production tools (Herstand, 2023). As a result, many academic institutions are reevaluating their music production curricula to better prepare students for the modern commercial music landscape (Klein & Lewandowski-Cox, 2019). This article explores the process of updating an existing music technology curriculum to a commercial music curriculum and offer insights, practical strategies, and recommendations for educators looking to make this transition successful.

The music industry constantly evolves, and the strategies and recommendations may need to be updated quickly (Mugisha, 2019). Conducting ongoing evaluations and adaptations to keep up with the latest trends and technologies is essential. Since the study of music technologies is broad, this study focuses on curriculum design, teaching methods, and student outcomes.

A Brief History of Modern Music Technology

Music production programs have been integral to higher education for several decades. Numerous institutions offer courses and degree programs to teach students the technical skills and creative processes of producing music (Renzoni & Boyce, 2022). In the early days of music production education, the focus was primarily on teaching students how to record and mix music using analog equipment, such as tape machines, mixing consoles, and outboard gear (Burgess, 2014). As digital technology revolutionized the music industry in the 1990s

and 2000s, music production programs began incorporating digital audio workstations (DAWs) and other software-based tools into their curricula (Dorfman, 2022).

However, the rise of digital distribution platforms and the development of music production tools have transformed the music industry in ways that many educators and institutions were unprepared for (Ruthmann & Mantie, 2017). As music production software became more affordable and accessible, the barriers to entry for aspiring musicians and producers were significantly lowered, leading to a flood of new talent and competition in the industry (Dorfman, 2022; Urkevich, 2019). At the same time, the decline of physical media and the rise of streaming services have drastically altered how music is distributed and monetized, presenting new challenges and opportunities for music professionals (Camlin & Lisboa, 2021; Sundet & Colbjørnsen, 2021).

In response to these changes, many academic institutions have recognized the need to adapt their curricula to better prepare students for the modern commercial music landscape. This has led to commercial music programs, which aim to provide students with a broader range of skills and knowledge related to the industry's business side, such as music marketing, copyright law, and music licensing (Klein & Lewandowski-Cox, 2019). In addition to traditional music production courses, commercial music programs may include entrepreneurship courses, music industry history and trends, and artist management.

The development of commercial music programs has also coincided with the rise of new technologies and platforms, such as streaming services and social media, which have further transformed the music industry and created new opportunities and challenges for aspiring musicians and music professionals (Klein & Lewandowski-Cox, 2019). The ability to self-publish music on platforms such as SoundCloud and YouTube has enabled independent artists to reach a wider audience than ever before but also presents challenges in monetization and copyright infringement. Similarly, the rise of social media has created new avenues for music promotion and fan engagement but also raises questions about privacy and data ownership (Cannon & Thomas, 2021).

The Shift Away from Traditional Music Education to Commercial Music

In recent years, colleges have shifted from the traditional emphasis on classical music toward commercial music. One reason for this shift is the changing demands of the music industry, which is increasingly focused on popular music genres such as rock, pop, and hip-hop (Holt, 2019). As a result, music schools and universities have begun to offer programs and courses that focus on the skills and techniques needed to succeed in the commercial music industry (Angel-Alvarado, 2020; Wang, 2021).

Another factor driving this shift is music students' changing tastes (Modeme, 2022). Many young musicians today are more interested in learning how to play and create popular music than in mastering the technical skills required for classical performance. This has increased demand for commercial music education programs that offer instruction in songwriting, music production, and music business (Angel-Alvarado, 2020; Wang, 2021).

The rise of technology has also played a role in the shift toward commercial music education (Dorfman, 2022; Haines & Matthews, 2021). The widespread availability of digital audio workstations, home recording equipment, and online distribution platforms has made it easier than ever for aspiring musicians to create and promote their own music. As a result, music schools and universities have had to adapt their curricula to provide students with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate this changing landscape (Angel-Alvarado, 2020; Wang, 2021).

Despite the shift toward commercial music education, classical music remains integral to many collegiate music education programs (Kladder, 2022). It provides a foundation in music theory, history, and technique that is valuable for any musician, regardless of genre (Stillie & Moir, 2021). However, the increased focus on commercial music reflects the changing nature of the music industry and the evolving interests of music students (Angel-Alvarado, 2020; Wang, 2021).

How Music Production and Commercial Music Differ

Music production and commercial music are related but contain distinct concepts and knowledge. Music production refers to the process of creating and recording music, which can include a range of different styles and genres. Music production programs involve various technical and creative skills, including recording and mixing audio, editing and arranging music, and mastering tracks for distribution (Burgess, 2014).

On the other hand, commercial music refers specifically to music created to generate revenue through sales or licensing deals. Commercial music can be produced using the same techniques and skills as music production. Still, it is often designed to appeal to a broad audience and generate significant sales and streaming revenue (Bell, 2020).

While commercial music is often associated with major record labels and mainstream genres like pop, rock, and hip-hop, independent artists can also create and market successful commercial music (Kladder, 2022). The rise of digital distribution platforms and social media has made it easier for independent artists to reach a global audience and generate revenue through their music (Jones, 2021).

Music production is a broader concept encompassing all aspects of creating and recording music (Hepworth-Sawyer & Golding, 2011; Swindali, 2022). In contrast, commercial music specifically refers to music designed to generate revenue through sales or licensing. However, it is essential to note that many music production projects, even those not necessarily designed to be commercial hits, can still be commercially successful through alternative means such as sync licensing, placements in film and television, and live performances.

Comparing Music Technology Curricula to Commercial Music Curricula

Switching from a music production degree program to a commercial music program can benefit students and institutions. Commercial music programs provide students with a well-rounded skill set, a deeper understanding of the music industry, and opportunities for real-world experience and collaboration (McCandless & McIntyre,

2018) because the curriculum often requires students to develop skills needed for popular music styles and coursework that delves into the music business.

Colleges that train future music professionals must stay updated with the latest trends and practices to prepare students for success (Renzoni & Boyce, 2022). If the industry emphasizes commercial music and revenue generation, it may make sense for a college to adjust its curriculum accordingly.

Commercial music programs are often perceived as more relevant to the modern music industry (Holt, 2019). In recent years, the music industry has shifted with streaming, social media, and the Music Modernization Act, which “updates the copyright law to make statutory licensing more fair for creators and more efficient for digital music providers” (U.S. Copyright Office, 2021). The demand for commercial music has increased, while the demand for traditional music production has decreased. Traditional music does not teach modern musical styles and is less centered on business than commercial music is (Bell, 2020). The music industry has shifted from one that was controlled by a few large labels to one in which the independent producer has the opportunity to create music, develop fans, and collect royalties.

This shift increases the need for the artist desiring to become a producer/artist proficient in skills beyond mixing and mastering music. By focusing on commercial music, students can gain a deeper understanding of the industry and its current needs, which can help them better prepare for a music career where knowledge of production, popular musical styles, the business of music, and artists management is needed.

While music production programs focus on technical skills such as audio engineering, mixing, and mastering, commercial music programs cover songwriting, music theory, and composition (Hepworth-Sawyer & Golding, 2011). Commercial music often includes instruction in non-traditional music styles such as rock, pop, blues, country, and R&B. This instruction allows students to develop a well-rounded skill set that can be applied to various areas of the music industry (Kladder, 2022). Commercial music programs employ a more interdisciplinary approach such as performance, production, business, and marketing.

They are also encouraged to collaborate and work with other students from different backgrounds (Haines & Matthews, 2021). This can help students develop a deeper appreciation for the creative process and provide opportunities for networking and building relationships with other industry professionals.

Commercial music programs offer greater real-world experience and hands-on learning opportunities. Students can work on commercial projects, intern at music companies, and participate in music industry events and conferences. This can provide valuable experience and help students build a portfolio of work that can be used to launch their careers in the industry (Kladder, 2022).

Real-world experience includes such things as mixing and mastering, where the recording is prepared for streaming, terrestrial radio play, and even vinyl and CD production. Students can also learn the role of producing songs and album projects as well as learn studio musicians skills by collaborating with other students on commercial music projects. These skills are acquired over time, and learning them in a university setting could give students a head start before they move to places such as Nashville, Los Angeles, or New York. Coursework focusing on live sound could prepare the student to do live audio work, a skill that is in demand by churches, live musical acts, corporations, or even touring with a major audio company. Through courses focusing on the music industry, students can also learn about the music business, especially the licensing and streaming royalties.

Transitions in Traditional Music Programs

Band and choir have been major extra-curricular activities for United States school programs since the 1920s (Martin, 1999). During this time, marching bands and wind ensembles were popular forms of entertainment, along with vocal, dance, and show-biz groups (Camus, 1980), and band directors often worked with various organizations and groups, including circuses, church groups, and opera houses. Colleges and universities did not have developmental music programs to educate aspiring band directors, and public secondary schools initially hired directors with little formal music education. In response to this need,

universities developed formal music education programs to teach university students the best practices for becoming secondary school band directors (Martin, 1999).

Early twentieth century technological advancements such as automobiles and road improvements helped musicians travel to find work and collaborate to promote themselves in the music industry (Cornelius, 2004), and the invention of the phonograph helped many Americans to play and record music (Brady, 1999). Music recording was more accessible to the public and became one of the most popular forms of entertainment, so for the first time, people could discover new music and listen to their favorite pieces of music repeatedly while sharing the experience with their friends and family (Martin, 1999).

Prior to the 1980s, public schools had a limited selection of electives (Kinney, 2019), and after the 1980s, participation rates for school band programs began to decline. Students were becoming disinterested in extra-curricular activities, and band was a time-consuming and complex extra-curricular activity at the school (Aróstegui, 2016). Band programs needed to be promoted in order to interest more students, so band directors recruited students by demonstrating musical instruments and holding meetings to discuss the attraction and fun music and band activities could provide. Band directors even planned exciting trips to attract new and beginning band students.

As the economy declined and layoffs caused families greater economic hardships, students found the need to find a job rather than participate in extra-curricular activities like marching band. With State legislatures requiring more graduation requirements and schools offering more elective choices, music programs needed to be more prominent to raise the number of students in these programs. Potential collegiate music students began taking a more pragmatic approach to the arts, looking to other majors to embark on a career (Hansen, 1988).

Technology can also be seen as a factor in band attrition (Justus, 2002). Due to the increasing popularity of television, students have other forms of entertainment. Programs such as MTV impacted young people to emulate certain behaviors and appearances to blend in with newer trends in music and in society in general (Greeson & Williams,

1986). Due to the emergence of new social trends, the popularity of bands decreased and was viewed negatively by some parts of society. These matters continue to be present, with social media and other platforms becoming increasingly convenient. Many students join school band programs to interact socially but feel they can accomplish a similar result through social media outlets with less effort (Dagaz, 2010).

Main Outcomes to Focus on for a Commercial Music Program

By using a reverse design approach to designing a collegiate-level music curriculum in commercial music, looking at industry standards and best practices in the music industry can be a valuable resource in constructing program outcomes. Studies show that professionals in commercial music have multiple skills to be successful and can make a livable income. The three main facets needed are (1) music production skills, (2) proficient musicianship, and (3) the knowledge and workings of the music industry business.

Music Production Skills in a Commercial Music Program

Music production is a catch-all that includes digital audio, studio recording, live sound, live production, and even stage lighting (Burgess, 2014; Gibson, 2020; Swindali, 2022). The goal is to start the candidates as freshmen in basic music coursework. These courses, such as music theory, keyboard, musicianship, and ensembles, have been the core of most collegiate programs for many decades. Towards the second semester of the sophomore year students progress in courses that focus on music production, performance, and the business side of commercial music. Accordingly, a producer who is well versed in music theory, instrumental and vocal musicianship, as well as keyboard skills will be able to produce music live and recorded with a degree of artistry and precision that may be lacking in someone who learned these skills through trial and error (Clauhs et al., 2019; Huber & Runstein, 2018).

The goal of a commercial production program is to compress the time the student would need to be ready to enter the commercial music marketplace into the last six or seven semesters before graduation

(Kladder, 2022). This would be accomplished by using a backward curriculum design. Curriculum designers would list as many skills as necessary for industry competency and embed them into the degree. Skills like mixing and mastering, industry practices, production management, and other necessary items would be woven into the coursework.

Musicianship and Musical Artistry Skills in a Commercial Music Program

The very nature of commercial music means the student would develop competencies in commercial music styles on a chosen primary instrument. Many musicians work in groups or ensembles, so they must have strong collaborative skills. This includes communicating effectively with other musicians, listening and responding to what they are playing, and working towards a shared musical vision.

In addition to musical groups, students will have private lessons in playing styles like rock, blues, jazz, country, and R&B. Applied lessons are standard within most music colleges. They are typically required for schools to be accredited. Typically music students take four to six semesters of private lessons and learn fundamentals and techniques during them.

For most musicians playing rock or pop, the learning process has been playing and copying. (Green, 2002) This approach differs from the traditional classical approach, where most musicians begin with foundational musical concepts- staff, notes, and rhythmic values- and move towards reading and performing written sheet music. With traditional musicians, the value is contained in the written score, but with commercial or popular musicians, it is improvisational skills and style.

The Importance of Understanding a Primary Instrument

One of the most fundamental aspects of musicianship is the ability to play an instrument at a high level. Students must develop their playing technique with one or two instruments. Technical proficiency is critical for musicians to express themselves creatively and better understand music theory and composing (Doğantan-Dack, 2016).

Learning an instrument can help music production students to develop their composition skills. They can experiment with different sounds, rhythms, and melodies to create new and unique music.

Another critical skill for commercial musicians is the ability to read and write music notation. Studies have shown that reading music helps prevent students from quitting organized musical ensembles and helps them profoundly understand music (Gudmundsdottir, 2010). Learning to read and write music notation allows students to communicate musical ideas accurately and precisely. They can identify the musical elements used in a piece, such as melody, harmony, rhythm, and form, and understand how they contribute to the overall musical effect. This allows them to communicate their ideas to other musicians and to understand the structure and context of the music they are playing.

By playing an instrument proficiently, a music producer or commercial music musician has a stronger connection to the music in the project they are involved with. By experiencing music through playing it, a musician learns about the elements of music and understands music theory practices. Through regular practice and performance, students can develop a more acute sense of hearing, which helps them better understand music and develop their unique artistic voice. This can lead to a deeper appreciation of different musical styles and a more nuanced understanding of musical composition and structure while collaborating with other musicians and industry professionals. Playing music in a band or ensemble setting teaches students how to communicate effectively, compromise, and work towards a common goal, which are essential skills in the music industry. Because of this, the musician can develop a deeper emotional connection to music and learns more about what makes aesthetically pleasing music (Creech & Hallam, 2011).

Methods of Playing Music in Ensembles

Commercial music styles are communicated in various ways. Reading chord charts is popular among many commercial musicians and is often the first method students will use to understand how to play and perform with other musicians. Another method is an improvisational style. This method gives the musician more freedom to perform, and they do not have to rely on reading anything.

Another popular method of notation where musicians communicate and play music is the Nashville Number System (NNS). This Arabic numeral-based system gives a number to each chord in the musical key of the piece. The Nashville Number System (NNS) is a system of musical notation used by many professional musicians, particularly in the country and gospel music genres. It is a shorthand method of writing down chord progressions using numbers instead of chord names, making it easier to communicate quickly and transpose music on the fly (De Clercq, 2019).

In the NNS, each chord is assigned a number based on its position within a key. The first note of the scale is assigned the number 1. The second note is assigned the number 2, and so on. For example, in the key of C major, the C chord would be represented by the number 1, the D chord by the number 2, and so on (De Clercq, 2019).

Music Industry Practice in a Commercial Music Program

Music industry practice encompasses all the methods and standards used in the music industry and constantly evolves to keep up with technological, social, and cultural changes (Katz, 2010; Schlesinger, 2022). Music industry practice refers to the conventions, customs, and methods used in the music industry (Radbill, 2017). These concepts are recording, live performance, music publishing, and music marketing and include the processes and standards related to recording, producing, promoting, distributing, and consuming music.

The production and recording of music is a fundamental aspect of music industry practice. However, the music industry has evolved from traditional analog recording and mixing methods to digital recording and production techniques that are now more common (Danilova & Krupa, 2021; McDonald, 2022; Owsinski, 2023; Wikström, 2020; Wixen & Petty, 2019). With the advent of digital distribution platforms, such as streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music, the way music is consumed and distributed has significantly changed (Cannon & Thomas, 2021; Prey et al., 2022; Richardson, 2014; Wlömert & Papies, 2016). In addition to physical media such as CDs

and vinyl records, digital distribution has become the primary method for disseminating music.

Intellectual property and copyright law are integral to music industry practice. Copyright law protects musical works from unauthorized use and ensures that music creators are compensated for their work (Woods, 2021). Along with the Music Modernization Act, royalties, performance fees, and other forms of compensation ensure artists receive fair compensation for their work. The debate on fair compensation models for artists continues to evolve for streaming mediums (Chalmers et al., 2021; Passman, 2019).

Music Distribution

The music industry has undergone a significant shift in recent years, with the decline of physical media such as CDs and the rise of digital streaming services. Various factors, including technological advances, changes in consumer behavior, and modifications in the broader cultural and economic landscape, have driven this shift (Herstand, 2023; Oswinski, 2020).

With the widespread adoption of high-speed internet and the proliferation of smartphones and other connected devices, it has become more accessible and convenient for people to access music online. The decline of physical media, such as CDs, has been a critical factor in the rise of streaming (Cannon & Thomas, 2021). As a result, many consumers have moved away from purchasing physical media and instead opted for digital streaming services.

Streaming services offer a range of benefits over traditional physical media, including convenience, accessibility, and affordability (Towse, 2020). A streaming service allows users to access millions of songs and albums from a single platform without purchasing individual CDs or downloads. This makes it easier for users to discover new music and explore a broader range of genres and artists (Barata & Coelho, 2021; Mugisha, 2019).

Another advantage of streaming services is that they offer a more equitable revenue distribution to artists. In the past, the music industry was dominated by major record labels, which had significant control over the distribution and sale of music. This often resulted in artists

receiving only a small percentage of the revenue generated by their music. With streaming services, artists have greater control over their music and can receive a more fair share of the revenue generated by their work (Lozic, 2020). While many music enthusiasts still value physical media, such as CDs and vinyl records, it is clear that digital streaming services are the future of the music industry (Daniel, 2019).

Social media has also played a significant role in the music industry, providing musicians with a powerful tool for promoting music and engaging with fans (Jones, 2021). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow artists to connect with fans directly, share updates and behind-the-scenes content, and build a loyal following. Social media also allows musicians to gather feedback from fans, which can help them refine their music and marketing strategies (McDonald, 2022).

Music distribution and social media are both critical components of commercial music. Effective distribution strategies help musicians reach a wider audience and increase revenue. At the same time, social media provides a powerful tool for building a brand, engaging with fans, and launching new artists to success (Allen, 2022; Cannon & Thomas, 2021).

Commercial Music Curriculum

Current best practices in writing a commercial music curriculum include staying informed on industry trends and emerging technologies to provide students with the skills to adapt to changes (Holt, 2019; Hui-Min & Bin, 2019). The curriculum should incorporate practical, hands-on experiences such as songwriting, production, courses on digital marketing, music promotion, and social media management, and performance opportunities to develop students' skills and prepare them for real-world experiences (Dorfman, (2022). Providing students with industry networking and mentorship opportunities can help them gain valuable experience and connections in the field. The curriculum should also emphasize the importance of entrepreneurship and business skills to help students succeed in a highly competitive industry. Assessing the curriculum regularly to ensure it remains relevant and practical is crucial to maintaining its quality and usefulness for students

(O'Hara, 2021). Regular assessment helps ensure that the curriculum remains relevant to the needs of the industry and allows educators to identify areas where students may be struggling and adjust the curriculum accordingly to improve student learning outcomes.

Commercial music curriculum best practices include courses focusing on music theory, music history, sight-singing, piano, and digital technology (Snodgrass, 2020). These classes provide students with a strong foundation in music fundamentals, helping them better understand commercial music's context and structure. With good music fundamentals, students will understand music better to perform, write, and record music with more detail and artistry.

The curriculum should also take a global perspective, reflecting the music industry's diverse and constantly evolving nature (Baym et al., 2021). Including courses on world music, music business practices in different countries, and cross-cultural collaborations can provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of the global music landscape (Modeme, 2022). Offering opportunities for extra-curricular activities such as music clubs, ensembles, and performances can help students develop practical skills and build their portfolios.

Developing a comprehensive commercial music curriculum requires careful consideration of industry trends, emerging technologies, practical experience, music theory, digital technology, global perspectives, soft skills, and extra-curricular opportunities. By incorporating these elements, educators can prepare students for successful careers in the music industry.

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