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Digital discourse and the human experiences of AI music: an ethnomusicological perspective

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Introduction

When Anna Indiana, the self-proclaimed first AI singer songwriter, released her debut track, 'Betrayed by this Town', on Twitter/X in November 2023, the response was overwhelmingly negative. A common theme in the discourse was a defence of the perceived creative superiority of predominantly male rock musicians, often juxtaposed with comparisons to Taylor Swift and the denigration of pop music and female singer-songwriters:

> This Hannah Montana, I mean this Anna Indiana, 'song' is about as vanilla as they come. No I'm not concerned. Any reasonable random generator could piece this crap together. Now, when I hear something like Rush's Tom Sawyer, or Beatles Yesterday, I'll change my 'tune'. (@BitterOldMan 2023)

> Sounds about as legit as any of the other pop garbage that gets forced into our ear holes. When it can generate a song like Stairway to Heaven or The Pot then I'll know it's arrived. Which it will I'm sure. (@Jsnluvnh8 2023)

> This is AI? This absolute shit, is going to take-over the world and render us all unemployed, oh, yeah, I'm quaking in my boots! Goodbye Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Eagles; this synthetic Taylor Swift, has touched me, in ways that no generic computer rubbish, ever has before! (Odysseus790 2023)

> This is completely void of soul, depth or feeling … kinda like pretty much every note Taylor Swift has ever written. (MickP_22 2023)

> You know it was bad and repetitive/reductive when Taylor was doing it, but this is 10000x worse lol. (RealOnlineHours 2023)

Comments like these highlight the dynamics of cultural production within digital spaces and illustrate how these processes connect to broader notions of music's sociocultural meaning, as mediated by technology. AI music outputs, discourse, and platforms exist in environments that foster specific cultures and meanings, leading to distinct technocultures.

This short piece explores some methodological considerations within an ethnomusicological study of AI music, particularly in light of its increasing platformisation and circulation through social media and other online spaces. As AI technologies become

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increasingly integral to music production and consumption, expanding ethnomusicological approaches can help to understand the *human* element of artificial intelligence entangled within cultural practices, as terms of both production and discursive meaning-making.

My focus is on AI-driven popular music production, principally as it occurs on browser-based platforms, as well as the online discourse and communities related to these platforms and their outputs. As will be further discussed, 'AI music' encompasses a wide variety of techniques and technologies, making it crucial to specify the particular form being discussed rather than resorting to generalisations. As AI music tools become more platform/browser-based, with participatory affordances borrowed from social networking sites—such as the ability to share, communicate, and collaborate—digital ethnographic methods provide useful tools for examining the technocultural environments where much AI music is created and shared. These approaches allow researchers to examine musical outputs, technological tools, and platforms alongside human experiences.

The history of any academic field includes calls for new methods, approaches, and theoretical underpinnings, and ethnomusicology is no different. Bob Sturm et al. highlight the growing prevalence of AI-generated music, and their work notes the lack of methodologies that adequately distinguish between various AI applications in music (Sturm et al. 2024); this gap presents an opportunity to develop approaches that integrate digital methods and recognise the human elements in AI music production and consumption. My intention is not to merely add to this history but to draw from my experiences conducting CTDA (critical technocultural discourse analysis) of online discourse as a potential approach to help address *why AI music matters* within varied communities and digital spaces. I position a method such as CTDA as a useful tool for considering the importance of music within online environments, and explore this through three main perspectives: the ethnographic value of technocultural methods; the need to counter misinformation surrounding AI music; and the importance of prioritising the *human* within AI music. This essay offers one approach to a broader toolkit, acknowledging that it is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution for studying online music cultures of AI music.

Ethnomusicology and AI music: methodological considerations

This exploration navigates the balance between disciplinary knowledge and a drive for increased 'theoretical promiscuity', a term borrowed from Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (2014). In my research (Avdeeff 2021), I have favoured a transdisciplinary approach over adhering strictly to the conventions of any one field, using methods and theories that best suit the aims of a study. I believe this approach holds significant value as ethnomusicologists and others consider the sociocultural implications of AI, particularly in the realm of AI-generated popular music.

From ethnomusicology, I note the importance of storytelling in ethnography (Fraser and Linares 2023), to explore the ways in which music becomes entangled in aspects of the human experience, influencing and perpetuating wider sociocultural factors. This includes examining the relationship between music and identities (Rice 2010), the social value of music (Blacking 1979), and the fundamental question of 'why music

matters?' (Seeger 2019). While Blacking argued for methodology as a defining aspect of the discipline, ethnographic fieldwork need not be limited to physical spaces. Given that AI music is primarily produced and engaged with on digital platforms, it is logical to explore its cultural significance within these environments.

To return to the idea of 'calls' within the field, there is decades of scholarship advocating for the inclusion of digital methods, whether in using computational analysis in the study of large datasets (Tzanetakis et al. 2007), digital humanities (Fraser and Linares 2023), or examining music's function in virtual communities (Frishkopf et al. 2015). Of particular interest here is René Lysloff's 1997 introduction of the term *technoculture* to ethnomusicology. Following Andrew Ross, who argued that the internet was fostering new communities and cultural practices, Lysloff noted the implications for ethnomusicology, suggesting the need to adapt the term to 'changing ideas of musical authenticity, cultural representation, and intellectual authority' (Lysloff 1997: 218). Despite the internet's vast expansion and the emergence of online music cultures, the use of 'technoculture' still remains limited in the field of ethnomusicology.

In acknowledging the cultural production that exists within digital spaces, I have found that methods such as André Brock's (2018) critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) can function as a form of fieldwork that examines structural issues both within a platform, and the discourse that emerges therein. As a form of critical discourse analysis, CTDA provides tools for exploring the relationship between digital platforms and cultural ideologies. CTDA involves critically examining both the technical platform and its cultural practices, focussing on how varying interactions between the technical and the cultural give rise to distinct technocultures. In general terms, it is a method that concurrently applies CDA techniques to technology and discourse, uncovering how the discourse emerges from technocultures.

A nuanced understanding of AI music

Platform specificity is entangled with wider issues of misinformation across AI narratives. Such misinformation can distort public understanding of the current capabilities of AI technologies. Studies have shown that one's cognitive schema, or AI imaginary, is informed by both fictional and nonfictional AI depictions/narratives (Hudson et al. 2023). Consequently, heuristic knowledge may be used to generalise one's understanding of AI to currently impossible applications, such as self-driving cars and autonomous Terminator-style robots, rather than the more mundane ways that AI has already become integrated into everyday life. The AI imaginary may also influence interpretations of emerging AI music outputs (whether that be complete text-to-track songs, or human-AI collaborative works), where fears of dehumanisation may cloud critical judgment.

It is therefore important that scholars approach discussions of AI music with nuance to counter existing techno-misinformation. Neither 'artificial intelligence' nor 'artificial intelligence music' can be straightforwardly defined, but that opacity could be clarified through academic discourse. As such, when discussing the use of social media methods such as CTDA, I am here referring to AI music that is produced through browser- and app-based platforms, and the online discourse responding to these outputs. This distinguishes it from musicians incorporating AI into professionally released tracks, or those who create their own algorithms for production. This type of

AI music could theoretically be redefined as AI platform music, reflecting its primary modes of production and consumption. Within this overarching category, production techniques and genres vary: AI/deepfake covers (using platforms like UberDuck) and full-song generation (such as Anna Indiana, using platforms like as Udio or Suno). Distinctions between these methods need acknowledgment, as some full-song generation platforms require no musical or computational knowledge, relying on natural-language prompts or simple button pressing, whereas others allow for varying levels of customisation and control over the outcome. In addition, AI technologies facilitate multiple modes of engagement, from minimal human involvement (combining pre-existing instrumentals and vocals with a deepfake model) to significant human input (producing original vocals or instrumentals, then altering them with a deepfake model).

As an example, the misinformation that circulated when the mainstream press first began to report on AI covers downplayed human involvement, implying that these tracks were entirely produced through artificial intelligence (Abraham 2023). This type of discourse contributes to wider misinformation and fears about the loss of the 'human' in music production and notions of creativity.

Rehumanising the algorithm

Rehumanising AI music discourse involves emphasising the human elements in both AI music production and reception, to resist perpetuating a binary view of 'human' vs 'machine' music. Or, in other words, paying attention to broad understandings of the 'ethno' components of an ethnomusicological approach to AI music (Schultz 2020). CTDA is well positioned to aid in this, as it offers a framework to critically examine both the discourse and the platforms through which it emerges.

Incorporating CTDA into ethnomusicological frameworks thus offers valuable opportunities for (re)humanising AI music studies, while recognising the relationships *between* media, technology, and sociocultural power structures. Gabriel Solis (2017), for example, has previously discussed ethnomusicology's ambivalence towards technology, advocating for critical engagement that acknowledges music's human dimensions. This ambivalence can extend to types of AI generated music that are seen as challenging human autonomy and authenticity, particularly in response to more holistic text-to-music outputs. By foregrounding the social contexts and embodied human experiences that inform and respond to AI-generated music—including the deliberate aesthetic, ethical, and technical decisions made by human creators in curating datasets, selecting algorithms, shaping model outputs, and integrating AI-generated material into broader compositional frameworks—scholars can more fully account for the dynamics of cultural production within digital environments. This approach attends not only to the technological and musical artefacts themselves, but also to the socio-cultural processes through which meaning, authorship, and value are negotiated.

In my own research analysing almost 4000 tweets reacting to the release of Anna Indiana's 'Betrayed by this Town', I have found that regardless of any gendered bias being replicated in the song itself, gendered bias *is* prevalent in the discourse responding to such outputs. Reactions to Anna Indiana's debut track reveal deep-rooted gendered narratives in popular music discourse, particularly around authenticity, embodiment, and value. Many tweets centred on the song's perceived lack of 'soul', frequent comparisons

to Taylor Swift, and dismissals of the track as generic pop; each theme reflecting long-standing binaries that associate femininity and pop with inauthenticity and commercialism. This backlash against Anna Indiana, particularly in contrast to the constructed authenticity of artists like Swift, underscores how AI challenges expectations of emotional resonance and personal narrative in music. While Swift's parasocial appeal is built on curated intimacy, Anna Indiana's transparency as an AI figure leaves little for audiences to project onto, complicating her reception and reinforcing the cultural discomfort with non-human creativity in a space still governed by human-centred ideals.

To conclude, integrating digital methods such as CTDA with ethnomusicological approaches provides a useful framework for studying the human experiences of platform-based AI music. This approach addresses misinformation, recognises technocultural nuances, and emphasises human elements sometimes overlooked in wider AI technology discussions. By adopting a flexible and interdisciplinary methodology, we can better understand the complex environment of AI musics and their cultural implications.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Melissa Avdeeff is a Lecturer in Digital Media at the University of Stirling. Her research uses multimodal approaches in the examination of popular culture texts and digital/emerging technologies, exploring areas such as: social media and discourse analysis; AI and computational creativity; critical approaches to digital media and technology. Upcoming publications include the formation of an AI popular music imaginary within social media discourse, and an exploration of Tweet-based music journalism and the centring of controversy in response to Taylor Swift.

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