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Music AI's Global Reach

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Nadhamuni Gayatri Bharath is a Sydney-based musician and singer originally from Chennai in Tamilnadu, India. She was trained in Carnatic music in the "Guru-Sishya" tradition and performs traditional and contemporary fusions of Carnatic music in Australia and globally. She was recently approached by AI music company Mubert to produce a catalogue of Carnatic music. Unsure of what this meant for the cultural heritage of Carnatic music, Gayatri sought advice. What, she asked, were the implications of selling music that was not even hers but belonged to a cultural tradition, thousands of years old, that didn't really have authors? What did the AI do with the music? How could she do right by Carnatic music heritage? She'd already consulted the Indian Consulate General in Australia, who was keen to support her acting to protect Carnatic music, but although enthusiastic, these discussions hadn't eventuated in anything concrete. I was delighted that she came across my work studying the impacts of AI on music practices and reached out. I keenly agreed to meet.

We both had volumes of questions for each other. I gave my spiel. Mubert is one of the more "veteran" AI music platforms, founded in 2016, an eon before commercial creative AI's year-zero (I place this at 2021 with OpenAI's image-generator DALL-E, and the earlier GPT models). It's not akin to the new market-leading duo, Suno and Udio, both founded in the last two years, the former now valued at more than a half billion dollars. These two, I explained, have potentially already taken her music to train their models without permission. At least Mubert is in the business of asking. Indeed, their business model blends sophisticated AI generation with more traditional royalty-free music distribution—certainly not unproblematic either, but for different reasons. They'd pay Gayatri and an ensemble of her choosing what may or may not be deemed a reasonable wage for the labor of recording, and then top it up with a royalty split, details of which were undisclosed.

Gayatri had heard of Suno and Udio, and had had a play with Udio to see if it could generate Carnatic music, the output of which she described as "very poor." But she'd been completely unaware of the data-scraping issues of big AI. I stressed: if those programs are generating something resembling Carnatic music, this means they've already been trained on Carnatic music recordings, without permission and payment. You won't be receiving a call from them, let alone a check, nor any reasoned and informed thought or care about the rights and wrongs of how AI might render traditions of Carnatic music. I improvised a disappointingly unhelpful metaphor to express what kind of thing a large text-to-audio system does with your music: "it's a washing machine they're chucking your stuff into."

We didn't have time to discuss how this wider issue of copyright had recently been before Australia's Parliamentary Select Committee on Adopting Artificial Intelligence (Sheldon et al. 2024), which had pleasingly condemned as "farcical" the claims by big tech that, to paraphrase, generative AI must be granted the freedom to take whatever it wants, otherwise minority cultures might miss out on being represented in the data sets.

We dug a little into the technical detail behind how large AI models deal with data: that in the deep-learning black boxes of Udio and Suno, like GPT, Stable Diffusion and other high-profile generative tools, there was no way to trace attribution through the system, and there was no way to ask Udio or Suno to "unlearn" music they had been trained on, leaving only the blunt question of whether global copyright law will continue to permit this or not. But there was the smaller consolation that one could at least trace what people were entering into these generators: one could catch terms like "Carnatic," "veena," "Indian," or "raga," and indeed this had become another frontline of inquiry into tracing attribution.

By contrast to these vast black boxes, Mubert takes a more structured approach, using generative AI to produce variations specific to an artist or genre-based data set, with the system actively mixing instrumental tracks and applying rules to song progression. They also actively promote their artist-friendly credentials and trace how this is crucial to their worth as a production music provider—since the provenance of the music can be assured. Ironically, this guarantees the "royalty-free" nature of their product. i.e., the user need only pay a pro subscription fee to use the music in commercial applications and will not be liable to pay any further royalties. In fact, arguably Mubert is just a traditional copyright-free music distributor, simply adding some technology to customize the generated songs. Though like any of the current platforms jostling for market share and new growth opportunities, one could never be sure it doesn't "pivot" rapidly to pursue some new mission statement (Hodgson, 2020; Bown, 2024).

If one were to venture into a deal with an AI music provider, then, a central principle, in a minefield of uncertainty, would be the ability to maintain control of any licensing arrangement. I suggested that if any agreements were to be explored, they should certainly allow an exit, such as being time-limited and renewable. The field was moving so fast, technically, culturally and legally. At least with Mubert this was technically possible in that the artist could remove their work upon renewal of a contract.

But Gayatri was keen to stress that doing right by the musical heritage of Carnatic music was more than economic. Our discussion turned to what this meant, or could possibly mean, in a global music community, let alone one powered by AI. She wanted to preserve and support the traditions and cultures of Carnatic music, and at least not be complicit in its demise by AI.

A "catalogue" of Carnatic music, she explained, has quite a clear definition since there are 72 "parent" ragas, which musicians then adapt in infinite variations. The catalogue would be a suite of original recordings of this foundational set. These, she stressed, belong to no-one; they are part of an ancient heritage.

Colleague and legal scholar Kathy Bowrey explained to us in a later meeting that India is developing a framework for protection of traditional knowledge (TK) and traditional cultural heritage (TCE) that broadly applies to the protection of traditions such as Carnatic music. A Traditional Knowledge Bill (2022) proposed recognition of the complete and absolute right of the Union of India over the traditional knowledge that exists within its national territory. There is also a National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of India, which aims to document cultural knowledge to assist in its being protected, respected and preserved[1]. It includes many examples of Indian classical musical styles and compositions. While currently there is no specific TK law that could be enforced against an AI company, Bowrey explained, there is a moral economy that can influence action and acceptance. Short of a more tangible solution, such moral guidance can at least form part of the politics of resistance to AI's seeming inevitability (Crawford, 2021). This, for example, could be expressed in the

[1] https://www.indiaculture.gov.in/national-list-intangible-cultural-heritage-ich

policies of significant public organizations and where respect for traditional knowledge rights is a condition of receiving public funding, as with Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property protocols in Australia.

Also, AI is not bulldozing a pristine cultural terrain: a familiar tapestry of exploitative practices already exists in the modern Carnatic music landscape, such as the forcing of musicians into fixed-fee recording sessions or coercing them to release live recordings (Ganesan, 2017). Copyright battles have already been fought over musical material that arguably should have been classified as *scènes à faire*, those common cultural elements that transcend individual ownership (Agrawal, 2022). One commentator remarks how quickly things have moved "from IP having no significance in Carnatic Music to IP being used as a tool of oppression" (Ganesan, 2017).

India is home to its own big media business, not least Bollywood, as well as a considerable tech and startup industry, including a growing list of AI startups: among them Beatoven in music, and in the wider sphere, Neural Garage, Sarvam AI, Unscript AI, Qure AI, Model Lab, and Noqo Robotics. That's not to say these businesses aren't free of colonial associations, since some part of the venture capital backing such initiatives still comes from the West, let alone the entire tech-economic arms race itself, which must be kept up with, as Sprengel (2023) outlines in a case study of music streaming in Egypt.

We could agree that the best way forward is to be no part of any commercial AI initiative until there is more clarity. The argument that someone else somewhere would do it anyway (they already have) is a poor rationale for doing something you think is wrong, but does, of course, mean that your own resistance may amount to little.

The meeting was a moment in time typifying the suffocating pace of disruption befalling music under AI. In the same month, court proceedings brought against Suno and Udio by major labels have gotten under way. The UK government's proposed tolerance of generative AI fair use continues to make headlines, drawing the interest of other countries. UK creatives have long been a veritable force, and musicians have led a coordinated public campaign against the proposed liberalization of controls via an "opt out" clause, spearheaded by AI copyright campaigner Ed Newton-Rex (News Media, 2025).

APRA/AMCOS, Australia's music rights agency, has drafted a plan to seek a non-exclusive mandate from members to license their music to AI companies, taking an opt-out approach. After ringing alarm bells in 2024 with a major report into the projected economic damages to the music industry, and commending the findings of the Australian Senate Select Committee's report, it's natural that APRA/AMCOS has moved to be on the front foot dictating what input data licenses need to look like in a world where AI companies are no longer allowed to help themselves. Indeed, they claim, if copyright holders aren't designing plausible licensing strategies, it adds weight to the claims by AI companies that blanket exemptions are necessary. As in the UK, the opt-out approach will likely be a point of contention: Artists like Gayatri, releasing music in Australia, could easily find their music suddenly sucked up into generative AI systems, but this time with a full legal sign-off.

For many musicians, the crux of the issue will be the sums involved. A brief look at the economics of AI paying for its training data, given the vast amounts of data needed, implies there will be very little to go around. After all, AI companies are claiming that the cost of creation falls to zero. If musicians are able to resist their music being taken for free, the question remains, can they resist it being taken for negligible sums all the same?

This may resemble the crisis in streaming, but at least in streaming attribution can be traced—one can achieve fame if not fortune—and the musical work has a sanctity, not mashed up into a new form as it is with generative AI (Born, 2024). With AI, there's yet to be a compelling reason to sell your work to be thrown into the washing machine. Logically, the way forward for AI companies is to differentiate value, to pay higher sums for "premium" content, blended with a longer tail of free or cut-price content they can glean without repercussions, perhaps drawing on out-of-copyright, public domain, or in-house created materials.

As ever, a potential opportunity is that AI, in compounding the pressure, also helps consolidate more far-reaching action that looks beyond individual protections toward social outcomes, such as cultural heritage objectives. As Born observes in earlier work, concerning the most basic "awareness of musicians' cultural rights" in the Indian context, "the cultural politics of *music* . . . has not taken on board issues that have been articulated in the museum and art worlds" (Born, 2013), but they easily could. "Perhaps the *first* challenge," she continues, in a call to action that has defined our current team's study of Music and AI (https://musicairesearch.wordpress.com/), "is to imagine new forms of *collective subject* that revolve *neither* around the national society, *nor* the 'community' of cultural rights, *nor* the libertarian commons of so-called 'free culture'" (Born, 2013).

AI, in this sense, is just a new frontier of what Born describes as the "ontological violence fuelled by . . . social, cultural and economic [distances]" (Born, 2020) between, paraphrasing for this context, longstanding music cultures and those that celebrate disruption. A potential consequence, perhaps, is that AI might bring Western musicians closer to non-individualist thinking, beyond copyright, towards the kinds of collective commons that Born envisions, further outlined in Drott's proposal that an "alternative [to present arrangements] . . . may be found in commons-based practices instead" (Drott, 2021). Even then, Huang, Sturm and Holzapfel argue through a case study applying music AI ethics principles in East Asia, "seemingly universal concepts of 'human rights,' 'well-being,' and potential 'misuse' are ultimately fluid and need to be examined in specific cultural contexts" (Huang, Sturm and Holzapfel, 2021).

For now, it may be a small consolation that music, though buffeted by economics, is found endlessly practiced in more-than-economic ways. Giving the last word to Crawford and Schultz: "mistaking rights over expression for rights over one's livelihood is part of the politics that current copyright law perpetrates. The destabilization that generative AI offers us is an opportunity to rethink these politics and potentially change our relationship to it—within and beyond the art world" (Crawford & Schultz, 2004).

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