

EDITORIAL

Generative Music Systems Need Consent, Attribution, and Compensation

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Debate about generative music often begins with a listening test: is the output convincing, original, or useful? These questions matter, but they can obscure the infrastructure behind the sound. Models are developed through datasets, labeling practices, computing resources, software, and human feedback. Musical data may include recordings, scores, metadata, isolated tracks, performance gestures, and stylistic descriptions. Each element carries a history of labor and rights.

Music-generation research has developed increasingly capable systems across symbolic and audio domains. Capability, however, does not determine legitimacy. A model can produce technically impressive music while relying on data whose provenance is unknown, whose permitted use is contested, or whose cultural meaning is lost through extraction. Ethical evaluation must therefore examine the entire lifecycle.

Consent is often reduced to the existence of a license or a platform term. Legal permission and ethical legitimacy are related but not identical. A musician may have agreed to distribution without reasonably anticipating that recordings would be used to build a system capable of generating substitutes or style imitations. A broad clause accepted under unequal bargaining conditions is weak evidence of meaningful choice.

Developers and data providers should create consent pathways that are specific, intelligible, and reversible where feasible. Creators should be able to learn whether their work is included, what kind of model is being developed, whether outputs will be commercial, and what controls remain available. Collective rights holders, performers, composers, producers, and communities connected to traditional music may have overlapping inter-

ests. Governance must not assume that one permission resolves all claims.

Opt-out mechanisms are better than no control, but they place monitoring costs on creators. Permission-based or licensed datasets offer a stronger foundation, particularly for commercial deployment. Research exceptions and public-domain materials remain important, yet their use should still be documented, and public availability should not be confused with cultural freedom from obligation.

Music is collaborative. A recording may depend on composition, arrangement, performance, production, engineering, and mastering. Training data and model development add further layers. Conventional attribution attached to a final track cannot represent every causal influence, but difficulty is not a reason to abandon credit.

Systems should maintain dataset documentation and machine-readable records of licensed sources. User interfaces should disclose when music is generated or materially transformed by a model. Where a tool is designed to emulate a named artist or a narrowly identifiable style, the burden of consent and disclosure should be especially high. Attribution should not imply that a referenced artist endorsed an output.

Compensation is difficult when millions of training items contribute indirectly to a model. Simple per-item accounting may be administratively expensive and may reward already dominant catalogs. Nevertheless, the absence of a perfect formula does not justify uncompensated commercial extraction.

Possible models include negotiated dataset licenses, collective remuneration, revenue-sharing pools, commissioned training catalogs, and payments for direct style or voice licensing. Each

has trade-offs. Collective models need transparent governance so that smaller and less frequently documented traditions are not excluded. Direct licenses require bargaining safeguards. Revenue sharing needs auditable definitions of revenue and cost.

The principle should be clear: commercial value created through organized access to musical labor should return value to the people and communities who made that access possible. Compensation is not a substitute for consent, and consent is not a substitute for attribution.

Universities, journals, funders, and conferences should require model documentation in music-AI research. At minimum, authors should report data sources, inclusion and exclusion criteria, rights basis, known limitations, human review, and procedures for complaints. Public demonstrations should not encourage misleading identity claims. Evaluation should include cultural and labor impacts alongside technical performance.

The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence provides a broad framework centered on human rights, diversity, transparency, and accountability. Music institutions can translate these principles into field-specific standards rather than waiting for a single legal rule to settle every question.

Generative music systems will earn trust through governance, not novelty alone. Consent, attribution, and compensation are not obstacles placed outside innovation; they are design requirements for innovation that can participate responsibly in musical culture. The most important question is not whether a model can make music that resembles human work. It is whether the system respects the human relationships and labor through which musical knowledge exists.