

EDITORIAL

Recommendation Systems Should Serve Musical Diversity

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Streaming services often present catalog size as evidence of diversity. Availability matters, but millions of accessible recordings do not ensure that listeners can encounter them. Discovery is organized through interfaces: home-page placement, autoplay, playlists, search ranking, similarity labels, and personalized recommendations. These systems allocate visibility among artists while appearing to respond only to individual preference. Music platforms are therefore cultural intermediaries, not neutral shelves. Their models translate listening histories and business priorities into predictions about what should come next. As platform studies has shown, the resulting system is shaped by data collection, classification, licensing, interface design, and institutional power. A recommendation may feel personal while depending on categories and incentives that listeners cannot inspect.

Calls for “more diversity” can remain empty unless the term is specified. Diversity might refer to genre, language, region, period, instrumentation, performer background, ownership structure, or degree of stylistic distance from a listener’s history. These dimensions do not always align. A playlist may include artists from many countries while remaining sonically narrow, or present varied genres while concentrating attention on a small number of rights holders. Platforms should therefore publish multidimensional diversity goals and explain their limits. The aim is not to force listeners into an externally approved curriculum. It is to ensure that the system provides genuine routes beyond the already dominant and does not mistake prior exposure for intrinsic preference. Popularity is partly an outcome of earlier recommendation; using it uncritically as an input creates a feedback

loop. Born’s relational account of music is useful here because it resists reducing musical value to either an isolated work or an individual response. Music is situated in social identities, institutions, technologies, and communities of practice. A culturally responsible recommender should accordingly consider whether it broadens relations among listeners, artists, scenes, and histories rather than merely increasing the probability of another click.

Personalization is often presented as convenience, but it can make the logic of discovery invisible. Listeners should be able to choose among modes: familiar listening, local or language-based exploration, historical pathways, editorially contextualized discovery, high novelty, or low commercial exposure. They should also be able to see why an item was recommended and reset or partition profiles when shared devices, study listening, children’s content, or professional research distort the record. User control would improve interpretation as well as choice. A recommendation labeled “because you played X” communicates a different basis from “newly released in your region” or “selected by an independent curator.” These rationales should not reveal proprietary code to be meaningful. They should identify the principal factors and the kind of recommendation being made.

Artists are commonly encouraged to optimize for platforms without knowing which actions matter or whether advice is reliable. This uncertainty creates markets for speculative promotion and encourages musicians to adapt release schedules, song structures, and communication practices to imagined algorithmic demands. Platform power is intensified when rules are consequential but opaque. Services should provide artists with plain-language documentation, notice of major

ranking-policy changes, and aggregate information about how listeners found their work. They should prohibit paid influence that is not clearly labeled and separate editorial judgment from commercial placement. An appeals process is also needed when music is wrongly classified, suppressed, merged with another artist, or excluded from recommendation because of metadata errors.

Recommendation quality is usually evaluated through prediction, satisfaction, retention, or engagement. These measures are useful but incomplete. Cultural evaluation should also examine concentration of exposure, discovery across languages and regions, repeated exclusion of particular repertoires, and the durability of attention after recommendation. A brief impression is not the same as meaningful discovery. Independent researchers need privacy-protective access to study these outcomes. Audits should be designed so that legitimate transparency does not expose individual listening histories. Platforms can publish aggregated measures, support secure research environments, and document changes over time.

Recommendation systems inevitably influence musical life. The question is whether that influence remains an unexamined consequence of engagement optimization or becomes an accountable cultural function. Serving musical diversity does not require a single universal definition of good listening. It requires plural discovery modes, intelligible explanations, artist protections, and evaluation that recognizes music as culture rather than content inventory. Large catalogs create the possibility of diversity; responsible recommendation turns possibility into encounter.