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## Limits of the Platform Economy

Digitalization and Marketization in Live Music

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## Abstract

Online platforms have disrupted parts of the capitalist economy, with allegedly severe consequences in the world of work. It is difficult to assess the potential magnitude of this effect, however, because little is known about the conditions under which platforms take over any given market, industry or occupation. This study examines live music in Germany and the UK, where online platforms do not dominate, despite considerable digitalization of market intermediaries. We argue that the live music market frustrates online platforms because (1) assessments of value are qualitative; (2) the task is complex and contingent; and (3) the organizational field is fragmented. Digitalization has varying effects on the organization of work and exchange relationships between musicians, intermediaries and clients. We find that, as the degree of digitalization increases, matching services tend to work less as a workers' representative – which is traditionally the case for live music agents – and more as a force of marketization that disciplines workers by orchestrating price-based competition.

## Introduction

A rapidly expanding social science literature is examining how digital online platforms are changing capitalist exchange and production in a way that disrupts industries, occupations and the employment relationship itself. By quickly matching buyers and sellers (Van Est and Kool, 2015), digital market intermediaries are allegedly driving the expansion of the 'gig economy' by encouraging outsourcing (Aloisi, 2018), the liberalization of employment relations (Forde et al., 2017; Nerinckx, 2016), and the casualization of employment (Fleming, 2017), especially in personal and professional services (De Groen and Maselli, 2016; Degryse, 2016). Well-known examples include Uber, Lyft, Taskrabbit, MTurk, Ebay, Airibnb, and Deliveroo.

How widespread has this disruption been? Huws et al. (2016), find that 16 % of European workers have used platforms, but very few have pursued platform work full-time. Krueger and Katz (2017) find that only 0.5 % of American workers identify customers through an online intermediary. Wallenstein et al. (2019) find a worker survey that between 1 % and 4 % of workers in the US, Japan, and six European countries see platform-based gig work as their primary source of income. Platform capitalism has thus developed within limits, but little is known about what those limits are.

This paper considers the conditions under which platforms might fail to take over a market. We examine the freelance segment of live music, where workers have long depended on one-off gigs, but where online platforms have not taken over. This finding surprised us, since early large platforms were created to facilitate communication between bands and their fans (Myspace) and to share music recordings (Napster). Indeed, arts and entertainment have been identified as likely areas of expansion for the platform economy (PwC, 2015), and many websites we study self-identify as platforms, even if their functionality does not reflect this.

Below we discuss the literature on the emergence and consequences of platforms as market intermediaries. Then we discuss our dataset of interviews and a systematic review of more than 160 websites in Germany and the UK, presenting our answers to three research questions. In what ways have intermediaries in live music become digitalized? Why has digitalization not enabled online platforms to dominate live music markets? What are the consequences of digitalization for transactions between musicians and customers? We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for improving exchange and work through worker organization and public regulation.

## The digitalization of market intermediaries

Digital platforms are increasingly the central figure in a metanarrative of a shift in capitalism in which casualization, flexibilization, automation, and marketization converge, often in utopian or dystopian ways. Before we turn to our material, we deal with three questions in the platforms literature. How should a platform be defined? What are the conditions under which platforms might take over a market? And what are the likely consequences for workers?

Scholars define online digital platforms in diverse ways. To economists they are strange hybrids: firms that can take over and become the market, simultaneously serving as intermediary and employer (European Commission, 2016; Eurofound, 2018). Compared to other markets, they are relatively open, and sometimes create a direct connection between buyer and seller similar to newspaper want ads and the electronic equivalents eBay and Craigslist. Unlike simple matching websites, however, platforms muster vast quantities of data that they gather through facilitating and monitoring transactions; these data are used via algorithms to govern the market, e.g. through rule enforcement and information provision (Drahakoupil and Fabo, 2017). Buyers and sellers actively provide information by managing their profiles, rather than receiving passively job offers or requests (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). Moreover, key aspects of transactions are conducted ‘on platform’, including searching but also payment (Farrell and Grieg, 2016). Platforms tend to act as monopolists where they establish themselves, since they are often subject to network effects, in which their usefulness is directly related to their dominance of a market segment, and since the marginal cost of scaling up is low. The latter are important pieces of evidence cited for claims that platforms are increasingly dominant in contemporary capitalism (Moazed and Johnson, 2016; Srnicek, 2017). The cases we examine below sometimes self-identify as *platforms* but in reality adopt a hybridised model. They often act as large open online forums for facilitating buyer-seller transactions and offer cumulative data such as pricing and user-generated ratings, but they fall short of this definition of a platform in various respects, as we will show.

Under what conditions do platforms achieve dominance in a market? The conventional story found in the sources above goes as follows. An increase in the power of computers created the technological preconditions. The economic recovery after 2010 created massive amounts of capital available to fund technology startups. Entrepreneurs saw an opportunity to address customer dissatisfaction with existing markets – due to low quality and high costs – and to find new ways to extract profits.

This creates a narrative of generalized platform expansion without shedding much light on why platforms are concentrated in certain sectors rather than others.

The literature, however, identifies several countervailing forces to platformization. Individual workers may resist the platform model in various ways, such as through *multi-homing* (simultaneously using multiple platforms) or seeking to shift transactions offline (Maffee, 2018). Collectively, platform workers may organize to enforce their rights through unions, collective bargaining, legal regulation, or cooperatively owned platforms (Scholz, 2016; AAP, 2018; Gearhart, 2018; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2018; Mix, 2017; Zamponi, 2018). Platform participants may be confined to narrowly defined circuits of exchange such as time banking or food sharing (Schor et al. 2015). Platforms may not succeed because of the nature of the task or market: for many services, it may prove difficult to devise a high-quality low-price business model before funding dries up (Manjoo 2016).

What, then, are the consequences of the rise of platforms, where they achieve dominance? For workers, the most obvious one is an increase in self-employment and outsourcing. For Farrell and Greig (2016) this is by definition: platforms connect consumers and workers directly, with the latter working when they want (rather than directed by an employer) and paid for a single task at a time (rather than by the hour). Platforms commonly derive their competitive advantage from their ability to bypass government regulation of the employment relationship (Eurofound 2018). Simultaneously, the operators of platforms impose their own regulation on markets by deciding who has access, the conditions under which both sides meet each other, what information is collected and displayed, how the price mechanism works, and how contracts are enforced (Agrawal et al., 2015).

Much of this depends on whether the platform effectively stages competition between workers. In online *clickwork*, where tasks can be performed at a computer, competition for jobs is orchestrated on a global scale which leads to pressure on incomes and potentially downwards convergence (Beerepoot and Lambregts, 2015; Huws, 2015). While the competitive pool is by definition smaller in a locally-bounded service market, the competition-intensifying effects of platform work transcend the local/global divide and are particularly obvious in cases like ride-sharing (De Groen and Maseli, 2016; Nurvala, 2015) or odd-job work (Minter, 2017). This competition can present a severe challenge to established price norms and regulations, demanding a regulatory or union response (Minter 2017). All of this makes it difficult for unions and government agencies to regulate the labour market (Graham et al., 2017).

As Langley and Leyshon (2017) point out, platforms can have such a marketizing effect on a sector, but this effect varies depending on the specifics of price setting and access to the market. In clickwork, clients post jobs along with prices to see which worker accepts, they may find sellers quickly even for very low-priced jobs. Uber and Deliveroo used a fixed algorithm rather than individual buyers to determine prices, but the company itself can unilaterally change prices. Downward prices can be intensified by virtue of the market's openness. Contracting out tasks on a global platform facilitates offshoring of small tasks, and allowing drivers with an app to transport passengers facilitates the opening of regulated taxi markets. In live music, platforms can offer amateurs access to jobs previously carried out by higher-paid professionals (Umney, 2017).

Because they structure the market in such a wide variety of ways, it is conceivable that workers could profit from the alleged economic benefits of platforms, such as reduced transaction costs, greater market access, and the mobilization of idle assets. Regulation of the platform economy has taken place mainly via law, but there are also nascent attempts to use collective bargaining (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2018; Zamponi, 2018). Another option is that workers themselves could create co-operative platforms to improve the terms of exchange on the market (Scholz and Schneider, 2017). We find no evidence that working musicians are organizing to improve working conditions in live music, using platforms or resisting platforms; in our view, this calls for explanation.

## **Digitalized intermediaries in live music**

The work of freelance musicians has long been organized as gigs, based largely on transactions between independent workers and a disparate set of individual clients. It features long-established forms of market intermediation which are sharply different from platforms and may be challenged by them. The main example is the figure of the agent. While agents and platforms occupy opposite ends of a spectrum, we will show that intermediaries hybridise these models.

Sociologists often discuss agents as part of the wider Bourdieusian analysis of *cultural intermediaries*, a heterogeneous group of actors who connect consumers and producers of cultural products, including marketers, cultural journalists, venue owners, and many other functions (Lize et al., 2011; Roueff and Sofio, 2013; Scott, 2012). Cultural intermediaries rely on their social and cultural capital to shape understandings of value in cultural scenes to their own economic advantage (Negus, 2002), and with considerable implications for the mechanics of

market exchange. They intervene in contexts where value is highly indeterminate and symbolic, trading on their ability to assess and legitimate certain producers relative to others (Roueff and Sofio, 2013). They can act as gatekeepers, determining which producers gain legitimacy and success in particular markets, mobilising their own symbolic capital resources to create *buzz* around certain producers (Scott, 2012). Their business models rely on accruing highly specific knowledge and prestige within specific cultural niches (e.g. Woo, 2012). In fulfilling this gatekeeper role, they can also cement inequalities in terms of prestige and participation (Doane, 2009; Jeanpierre, 2012).

Agents are sometimes contrasted with managers: traditionally, the former sought out and booked engagements for clients, while the latter directly advised artists on career development. However, these lines became blurred in the late 20th century (Fishelman, 1991; Lize et al., 2011; Naudier, 2013). A traditional agent-manager's role includes prospecting for work, acting as the musician's representative in negotiating deals with customers, and providing general career advice (Fishelman, 1991; Morrow, 2013; Sodomsky, 2014). In this sense, different agents have highly specialised and individual ways of functioning which reflect the needs of the artists they represent (Morrow, 2013). Thus, gaining access to an agent has typically been a vital career break for cultural workers, often bestowed as a result of fortune and contingency (Sodomsky, 2014).

Recently, increased competition, liberalisation and digitalisation have challenged traditional intermediaries in music (Morrow, 2013; Naudier, 2013). The consequences, however, are unclear and uneven. Hracs (2015) finds that the role of managers is becoming more important as a network lynchpin within smaller, local *DIY* music scenes, as they build new links with other actors such as designers, journalists and venues. Morrow (2013) argues, with reference to the international popular music industry, that increasing internationalisation and complexity is reinforcing the career-building functions of agents. However, one may also reason that, as digital technologies create new forms of intermediation and enable new ways of sampling and evaluating creative outputs, the specific expertise and social capital mobilised by cultural intermediaries may come under threat (Jeanpierre, 2012; Umney, 2017). The market-opening and standardising opportunities of digital technology presents a contrast and possibly a challenge to the symbolic capital-driven gatekeeper function of agents.

Table one compares the ideal-typical traditional agent with the ideal-typical platform, presented as polar opposite models of market intermediation. However, in our sample, intermediaries are not bifurcated in this

way. We observe a continuum from traditional agents advertising their acts on websites, to a smaller number of enterprises which approach *platformisation*, with a range of hybrids in between. Highly digitalized intermediaries tend to occupy lower-prestige, less lucrative market segments than traditional agents. Moreover, none of the websites we observed have all the characteristics of an ideal-typical online platform.

Table 1: Two kinds of market intermediaries

	<b>Traditional agent</b>	<b>Online platform</b>
Transactions are organized by ...	... a person with an idiosyncratic skillset uses social/cultural capital and insider networks	... algorithms, which speed up price setting, payment, and quality assessment
Role in market access	Gatekeeper that controls quality by restricting access	Almost anyone can gain access by registering as a user
Role in price formation	Upselling, representing artists and seeking to increase their fees	Reducing transaction costs and pushing prices down by organizing price-based competition
Role in information provision	Advertisement and promotion of artists on the roster, no customer ratings	Comparable user-generated data displayed, such as customer ratings
Scale and scope	Many agents restricted to particular networks	A small number of platforms takes over the market

Platforms have not taken over live music, we argue, for three reasons. First, live music does not lend itself to the easily comparable measures of price and quality that form the basis of data collection and algorithms, which buyers and sellers use to make decisions. In these ‘reputational’ markets, assessments of quality are inherently qualitative (Menger, 1999). Second, live music features too many negotiable contingencies for the entire transaction to take place on-platform. Transportation, set-up, repertoire, food, lodging, additional musicians, and services such as event management can feed into this negotiation, and these costs are often re-negotiated (Umney, 2017). Third, platforms in live music do not benefit from the low costs of scaling up, since the organizational field of live music is highly fragmented. Bands seeking members, brides organizing weddings, festivals seeking acts, or acts seeking venues: they all

turn to different intermediaries, which occupy different market niches, none of which take up a significant portion of the multi-billion dollar global concert business.

Despite these limits, however, we find that even partial digitalisation can produce a shift in the role of the intermediary from a worker's representative to a 'customer-facing' actor that orchestrates intense competitive pressure on musicians, and whose main mission is to provide a venue for the matching of supply and demand. The extent to which it serves as an engine of intensified market discipline of musicians varies across our sample, but some have been categorized as 'online sweatshops' (Umney, 2017). Incremental digitalization leads to incremental marketization, in the sense of intensified price-based competition, organized with an eye to extracting surpluses (Greer and Doellgast, 2017).

## Methods

The data presented in this work is a sequel to previous published studies. The initial motivation and context was provided by a set of interviews with 30 London musicians, which has been discussed extensively in various previous articles (e.g. Umney and Kretsos, 2014; Umney, 2016; Greer et al., 2018). This dataset led to some initial insights into the changing role of intermediaries in *function* music work, which was addressed in a more tentative way in a recent paper (Umney, 2017). By *function* music, we mean music as a service performing a standardised repertoire (often cover songs or tribute acts) for weddings, parties and corporate events. This more systematic examination of platforms was required to extend our study to intermediaries for *creative* music, in which the act showcases an original artistic contribution as with a concert at a music venue. Different intermediaries serve these two kinds of market.

We chose Germany and the UK because they are second and the third biggest live music markets globally (after the US). Although these data do not include function musicians and smaller concerts they can be considered an indicator for the importance of live music. 2017 ticket sale revenue in Germany and the UK were both roughly 2.1 billion dollars, with the UK is stagnating and Germany growing (IQ, 2017). In 2016–2017 German concert promoters generated 5 billion euros and took over from the book trade the first position among domestic entertainment markets.

We assemble our dataset from two main sources. One is 15 semi-structured interviews with trade unionists, intermediaries, one non-profit for musicians, and one professional musician and producer (table 2), including two trade unionists in the US who had created a website to disseminate local market information as part of an organizing project called 'Fairtrade Music Seattle' and who we thought might provide fresh insights on our topic. We interviewed managers at a number of intermediaries in the UK and Germany, as shown in table three. Their purpose was to flesh out and provide context for the database; they encompassed a range of different models and thus enabled us to get a better idea of how different models may function behind the scenes. It was difficult in Germany to find interviewees knowledgeable about online platforms, and several turned down interview requests. We also interviewed two senior organisers in the live department of the Musicians' Union and two members of staff at ver.di representing musicians. We also spoke to musicians with experience with platforms and collected online chats on

social media and bulletin boards between musicians about specific platforms.

Table 2: Interviews

<b>UK</b>	UK Union (two union officials 3 <sup>rd</sup> May 2018)* UK Agent 1 (traditional agents' representative 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2016)+ UK Agent 2 (digitalized agency 21 <sup>st</sup> September 2016)+ UK Agent 3 (digitalized agency 21 <sup>st</sup> September 2016)+ UK Agent 4 (digitalized agency 23 <sup>rd</sup> September 2016)+ UK Agent 5 (digitalized agency 23 <sup>rd</sup> September 2016)+ Musician with platform experience (27 <sup>th</sup> September 2018)+
<b>Germany</b>	DE Union 1 (ver.di, 13 <sup>th</sup> November 2017)* DE Union 2 (ver.di, 9 <sup>th</sup> October 2018)* DE platform (platform, 17 <sup>th</sup> September 2018)+ DE Agent 1 (traditional agent, 14 <sup>th</sup> November 2017)* DE Agent 2 (traditional agent, April 9 <sup>th</sup> 2018) DE Musician nonprofit (14 <sup>th</sup> November 2017)* DE Musician with platform experience (13 <sup>th</sup> July 2018)+
<b>US</b>	Union (1 <sup>st</sup> August 2018)*

Annotation: \* *in-person interview*, + *phone interview*

The main focus of our research became a systematic search and review of live music intermediaries in the UK and Germany. The aim was to catalogue and categorize all of the most important live music intermediaries with a web presence in these two countries. To do this, we developed a list of search terms, including those likely used by clients to book a band and by musicians to find gigs. The terms are shown in table 3. We entered each term into the most popular search engine ([Google.co.uk](http://Google.co.uk) and [Google.de](http://Google.de)) and read through the first ten pages of results. We recorded every online live music intermediary that appeared in an excel spreadsheet. Once our search terms began to yield no new results in the first ten pages of results, we took this to indicate data saturation. Other live music intermediaries may exist in both countries, but we can confidently say that those not included in our survey do not have a significant presence among users of online platforms.

Table 3: Search terms

	<b>UK</b>	<b>Germany</b>
round 1	<p><i>(Client-centered searches)</i></p> <p>Wedding band  Wedding bands music  live function music uk  hire band for party  party function band uk  hire band for event uk  uk hire band for party  uk party band  cheap party bands for hire  event band uk  (saturation)</p>	<p><i>(Client-centered searches)</i></p> <p>Hochzeitsband  Band für Hochzeitsmusik  Livemusikveranstaltung Deutschland  Livemusik-Event  Band buchen für Party  Band für Party Deutschland  Band buchen für Event Deutschland  Band buchen für Auftritt Deutschland  Deutschland Band buchen für Party  Deutschland Band für Party  günstige Bands für Party buchen  Band für Event Deutschland</p> <p><i>(Musician-centered searches)</i></p> <p>Musiker Vermittlung Deutschland  Gig Finden Deutschland</p>
round 2	<p><i>(Musician-centered searches)</i></p> <p>find gig UK  band find gigs  band find concert venue  live music gigs  (saturation)</p>	<p>gigs finden band  auftritt finden  auftritt finden musik  livemusik gigs  (saturation)</p>

We categorised entries according to several variables, inspired by the literature on platforms and key informant interviews (discussed below). The main variables were:

- Scale of representation: the number of acts represented on the site. In some cases this is readily visible in the information sites offer visitors. In other cases, it had to be gathered or approximated more laboriously by setting search parameters as generally as possible and tallying up the results.
- Details on the basic model for conducting transactions. Specifically: are prices readily visible or only available on request? Do customers submit an enquiry which goes direct to a band, or to the agency itself? What kinds of information is the customer required to input (for instance, are they prompted to give their preferred budget? How much detail are they asked to provide about the engagement before the request is submitted?)

- Where prices are displayed, what is the approximate price range? We kept records of the highest and lowest prices on all sites which displayed prices, and also recorded the median price for a four-piece band.
- Level of comparability and amount of data gathered. Are customers able to search and sort acts, and according to which criteria? We noted where they were able to sort by price, and whether there was some means of sorting and searching according to *quality*. Where there was, we also recorded whether this was through user-generated star ratings, or other methods (such as syncing with acts' profiles on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Soundcloud).
- Openness. We placed ourselves in the position of a musician seeking to access work via the site, and gauged how open this process was. Was there a simple, instant sign-up process to access a profile? Was an application required including submission of various promotional materials? Or were newcomers entirely discouraged from joining?
- Target market. Is the site aimed at advertising function bands to clients? At connecting creative musicians and venues? Or connecting musicians to other musicians, as with a band advertising for new members? Does it combine some or all of these elements?

We also browsed sites more generally (for instance, looking at sites' 'about' pages and published blogs where available) seeking to note down any additional qualitative information; for instance, particular unusual elements of a site's model, or any text which we believed revealed pertinent additional information about their perception of their relationship with musicians. Finally, taking these factors into account, we made an assessment in each case regarding whether, from a potential customer's perspective, the aim of the site appeared to be to represent acts, or to provide a venue for comparison.

Table 4: Digitalized intermediaries in live music, UK and Germany

	<b>Description</b>	<b>Examples (total number of acts when known)</b>	<b>Number</b>
General-purpose platform	Not specialized in music, events, or entertainment	Germany: AskCharlie, Ebay Kleinanzeigen, Erento, Markt.de, Mietmeile, Miet24.  UK: Bark	7
Listings site	High openness, low digitalization: facilitates offline, direct contact between buyer and seller  Mainly function music and musician-to-musician (e.g. adverts for bands wanting members or vice versa)	Germany: several local sites for the music scene or for weddings; crabbel.de, Bandboard (3,661), Musiker in deiner Stadt, Party Band Suche (342), Thomann, Festivalticker, Musiker Board (296), Musiker Sucht, Musiker sucht Musiker  UK: Join my Band, Like it Live Music (25), GigAll (78), Last Minute Gig, Six and Four, The Gig Guide, LemonRock; various specialised Wedding directories	30
Traditional agent	Low openness, low digitalization: facilitate contact between buyer and seller via intermediary  Operates in both function and creative domains, often at higher-end of market in terms of prices and prestige.	Germany: 21 including Musikagentur Jazz (4) and Eventportal (545)  UK: 52 including Good Indeed Bands (4) and Contraband (3,000)	73
Digitalized agent	Medium-to-low openness, medium digitalization: like traditional agent, but more open and/or user-generated ratings  Mainly function music	Both countries: Evenses  Germany: Gig Community (1,591), Eventzone (1,224), Eventpeppers (997), Hochzeits-Bands.info (567), Eventportal (545), Artisten fuer Dich (88), Guxme  UK: 16 including Coast Entertainment (45), Entertainment Nation (450), Headliner (1,000), Last Minute Musicians (3,000), Alive Network (6,500).	24
Live music platform	High openness, high digitalization: online direct contact between buyer and seller	Both countries: Gigmit (57,175), Sofa Concerts (3,600), Sofar Sounds  Germany: 123partymusik (4,633), Auftrittsmarkt (830), Backstage Pro (40,000), Gigstarter	13

	Mainly creative music	(4,500),  UK: Bandwagon (15,000), Encore Musicians (38,000), Live&Loud, Sonic Bids, SplitGigs, Gigmor (50,000)	
Unclass- ifiable	Idiosyncratic or not enough information	Miscellaneous sites catering to music students, band managers, street performers, and charity events	22
Sum			168

## How have live music intermediaries digitalized themselves?

Digitalization means very different things for different intermediaries (table 4). Most use digitalization merely to facilitate offline transactions, or to facilitate transactions via an existing intermediary, as in the sites of traditional agents. Out of 168 online intermediaries identified in our searches, only 13 were online live music platforms in the sense that they brought together large numbers of participants into an open market, mustered large amounts of data, and coordinated participants using this data. Even here, however, digitalization was limited, as payment usually took place offline, and offers were not displayed in a way that allowed easy comparison.

Table 4 provides an overview of the intermediaries we examined. They served diverse market segments, divided both vertically (high vs low prestige and price) and horizontally (function vs creative), although entrepreneurs sought to challenge these divides and musicians routinely moved between them (Umney and Kretsos, 2014). In addition to platforms we identify five different types, with many sites hybridizing and combining features of different types.

The largest group includes the websites of 73 traditional agents. These enterprises are more selective about the acts they represent, including some established internationally active artists (UK Agent 1). These sites featured acts geared towards both function and creative work, though a given site rarely encompasses both. Most of these agents were smaller than a platform, representing fewer than 100 acts, and the median size was around 50. There were some exceptions, such as the large agency Contraband (UK), which claims over 3,000 acts, though this covers all forms of entertainment and still appears to represent extremely high-profile artists such as Kylie Minogue.

Agents' websites typically lacked an *artist sign-up* link, but some directed musicians to make contact offline, with reference made to auditions or the need for the agent to view multiple live performances. They usually provided individual band profiles, which featured short quotes from selected satisfied clients, but none had an automated system for collating positive and negative ratings to compare acts. Information was provided by the agent to advertise acts they are representing. There is wide variation in the presentation and attention given to the website: some feature high quality videos, audio and promotional image files; others are amateurish and rarely updated. One in the UK was advertising Frank Carson, a famous comedian who had died in 2012. Interview data with a traditional agents' representative (UK Agent 1) suggests that

where these kinds of site give less attention to web functionality, this reflects that their priorities lie in developing ongoing offline relationships with larger clients such as events companies; the website is merely an adjunct to this offline business.

Other sites facilitated direct offline transactions between musicians and clients, mostly for function music, or among musicians. We found 30 such listings sites, such as *Join my Band* and *Hochzeitsband Berlin* (Wedding Band Berlin) that provided a directory or want ads for music, events, or entertainment. Many of them took a fee from musicians to include their profile in a list of entries, which included their direct contact details: their email, website or even mobile phone number. Comparability functions were rudimentary, the band could choose whether they display their price in their listing or not, and if they do in some cases customers could sort by price. We also identified seven general-purpose platforms, in which musicians offered their services alongside a diverse array of other offers, which operated similarly. Small numbers of German musicians advertised using Ebay want ads (Kleinanzeigen) or platforms originally created for renting out equipment (Erento and Mietmeile) or selling insurance (AskCharlie). These were mainly for function musicians.

Next, we identified a category of digitalized agents with 24 entries. This term denotes those sites which enable clients to sort and identify acts and where the level of digitalization was higher than with the traditional agents. These sites have a more open procedure for artists to sign-up online, or that they have introduced more involved forms of comparison according to price or popularity. Most have both. Sites geared towards function music dominated this category, but there were some hybrids.

Access to these sites was most commonly through an online sign-up. Unlike in live music platforms (discussed below), this sign-up usually took the form of an application form where acts would submit an electronic press kit: a collection of recordings, videos, and other marketing material, which would then be assessed. They appear to be more accessible than traditional agents, since they typically feature much larger rosters. We calculated the median number of acts on these sites to be 200, compared to 50 among traditional agents (the latter figure being approximately the minimum size of digitalized agents in our sample). The largest include Last Minute Musicians (3,000) and Alive Network (6,500). Note that while Last Minute Musicians's tally is the same as that of Contraband, the former is a site exclusively for musicians and the latter represents acts from all areas of entertainment; hence we can surmise LMM represents many more musicians.

More than traditional agents, digitalized agents organized client-driven comparison of acts, rather than artist representation. Certainly, interviewees at these sites in the UK (UK Agent 2; UK Agent 4) conceived themselves as more *client-focused*, rejecting the idea of themselves as musicians' representatives. Accordingly, these sites generally have more advanced comparability functions, though there is great variation in this respect within this category. There is wide variation in the sophistication of comparability functions, and usually the largest sites enable more detailed sorting processes. 16 of the 24 display prices up front and most of these enable the user to search according to price, and 12 enable sorting according to some form of quality measurement: most commonly user-submitted ratings (only one *traditional agent* enables this). We examine the implications of this client-centred emphasis on comparability below. However, some of these cases (UK Agent 3, UK Agent 5), were bifurcated in their functioning. While their general roster was rapidly accessible for artists and served a solely comparative purpose, they would select certain acts (the most popular ones among customers) for whom they would take on more agent/manager-type functions such as helping to produce new promotional materials, or more actively prospecting for work on their behalf.

Even the larger sites fall short of platformisation in decisive respects. Firstly, the data they amass to facilitate matching and comparison is relatively weak, as we show in the following section. Secondly, acts on these sites usually appear as relatively passive; they upload their profiles into a virtual *shop window* (UK Agent 3) and wait until they are approached for work. Most importantly, the transaction itself is never, on these sites, fully automated. Even where prices are listed, this is always merely a starting point: once client and buyer are in contact, there is always further qualitative negotiation to obtain a final price which is usually mediated by an individual manager working for the platform. We examine this point further in the next section.

Finally, there are 13 sites that are live music platforms, with the caveat that, while they resemble platforms in various respects, they fall short of the ideal-typical platform in others. These sites featured much larger numbers of musicians. Berlin-based Gigmit claimed nearly 60,000 acts; US-based Gigmore, 50,000; Denmark-based 123PartyMusik, 4,633; Netherlands-based Gigstarter, 4,500; Hamburg-based Sofaconcerts, 3,600. Their size reflected the ease of setting up an account (through instantaneous sign-up requiring only an email address) and their efforts to market themselves to musicians. They were more data-intensive, with client ratings or linked social media data. For instance, one site assigns a *GigScore* which is generated based on a composite of social media

data, including Facebook followers, Youtube views, and Twitter likes. They tended to occupy the lower reaches of the creative music hierarchy, working with musicians who would not normally have an agent. Unlike traditional and digitalized agents, these sites enabled profile holders to contact each other directly. They provided for user profiles on both sides of the transaction: venues looking for musicians create and manage their own profiles as well as the acts. Venues and clients could post gig opportunities as entries to which bands could attach their own profiles in the form of an application (to be assessed by the buyer).

One emerging subset of live music platforms focuses on private concerts by creative musicians. Gigstarter, Sofaconcerts, and Sofar Sounds all specialize in this. Sofar Sounds does so in partnership with Uber and AirBnB and presents itself as a provider of shared *experiences*. Both bands and individuals complete an application. If selected, the site's representatives select a number of bands and pair them with a venue for a concert announced 24 hours in advance. It has operated in 418 cities at the time of writing. Sofaconcerts is similar. About 40 % of the gigs matched are classical *living room concerts*, and more than half are creative music for a wedding or birthday party. The core geographical area of activity is central and Northern Europe, where 2,700 artists offer to play, but they have a smaller presence elsewhere in Europe, the Americas, Australia, South Africa, South Korea and India. Unlike other platforms Sofaconcerts has introduced quality control for new artists joining the platform and uses partnerships with talent scouts and street fairs to recruit musicians. Prior to the rise of these platforms, organizing a private concert required a personal connection with a creative music scene; these platforms opened the market to new customers as well (DE platform). These sites take some credit for creating this subsegment.

Given these impressive figures, it might seem that platforms are moving in the direction of taking over the live music market. A closer look at them, however, suggests that they are confined to particular niches and are not really competing with traditional agents. Live music platforms occupy niches where artists cannot afford representation, in part because they are not established yet, but also because they are working in a highly competitive market segment that includes many amateurs and informal norms that militate against policing minimum fees (DE Agent 2). A professional musician and producer who had used several different platforms, including a paid gigmit account, stated:

"I did not get any gigs through gigmit. [...] Most the DJs and musicians I know get their gigs like I do through personal contacts. I don't know anyone on gigmit. I have serious doubts regarding the gigmit system. I don't know who is using gigmit and how, nor how they manage their business. If they were a serious company they would be more transparent, they would publicize what they do

and how. The only thing I can imagine is that they combine unknown unprofessional bands and musicians with small town gigs.” (DE musician)

Platforms occupy a small and nonlucrative part of the music business. Backstagepro, for example, reports on its website advertising 2,000 gigs a year for 40,000 musicians registered, and Gigmit reports 2,000 gigs a month for nearly 60,000 musicians and DJs registered. The odds of getting a gig this way are obviously low, and many profiles are dormant. Prices are also very low. Most gigs advertised on Backstagepro offer costs but no pay, some offer door deals, and other offer to negotiate a fee. Gigmit, similarly, reports on its website advertising 66,076 gigs worth 8.1 million euros over its history, nevertheless, advertising a gig does not equal finding a band; in an article published in October 2016 Gigmit claimed to have organized 11,000 gigs worth 4 million euros (Hofman, 2016), an average of 364 euros. Given that live music ticket sales in Germany alone generate 2.1 billion dollars in annual revenues this, is a tiny slice of the market. Gigmit has expanded beyond creative work in 2016 to include function music and attempted to form partnerships with traditional agents. One traditional agent argued that this confirms the difficulties live music platforms have in the high end of the music market:

“A lot of the platforms contact me and other agents, try to convince us to work with them because they want to get interesting music to be announced on their web sites, making it part of their portfolio... but I do not see that happening. They keep asking me to meet, to work with them, but I don't like it. Sometimes I think maybe I should, if the whole music business changes and becomes totally electronic... but I do not see that coming, at least not soon. If you want a good gig an agency is better. Musicians should get paid decently, they should be able to live from their music. Otherwise they can also stay at home.” (DE Agent 2)

These platforms rely on diverse income streams. The main source of income for traditional agents is commissions, i.e. a share of the value of the gig, but this is insufficient for most of the platforms. Like platforms in other sectors, they rely initially on funding from investors. In Gigmit's case this has included public subsidies – 50 % of a 73,000 euro upgrade was paid by the European Social Fund for Regional Development (EFRE Berlin, 2018), and in October 2016 media reported that Sony music had invested a *6-digit Euro-sum* in Gigmit, through which they acquired a 15 % stake (Hofmann, 2016). Platforms also sell subscriptions to musicians. Gigmit, for example, has a free basic service and monthly subscription services: 9 euros for unlimited applications for gigs and a better placement on the site, 29 euros for exclusive premium gigs and access to the promoter database (with 4,923 entries); and 129 euros for tailored gig offers, individual booking service and personal assistance.

Most online music platforms have a similar fee structure. One platform we interviewed, however, noted the limits of the fee-for-service model and favored commissions:

“I know a bunch of musicians that cancelled their subscriptions because the relation between price and benefit is not given [...] if you pay more than you get out of it as a customer, than the business model might work on a short term, but it can't work long-term. When we developed our business model we had that in mind and decided that we can only be successful if our musicians are successful and therefore we decided to make profit only when our musicians make profit.” (DE platform)

These platforms are evidently struggling to scale up. They exist alongside traditional agents and other kinds of digitalized intermediaries. Moreover, calling them platforms requires qualification. Most platforms provide comprehensive comparison functions according to price and *quality*, at least compared to traditional and digitalized agents; but assessing the offer nonetheless requires studying dozens of profiles and large quantities of audio, video, and text. Despite their slick design, comparing providers on these sites is time-consuming. Moreover, to our knowledge, only two, Sofaconcerts and ACTED, enables payment through the platform, and even here part of the payment can take place off-platform.

## Why don't platforms dominate?

Live music markets resist the forces of digitalization forecast by writers on digital platforms. The intermediaries discussed above do not meet a strict definition of a platform: most exist to facilitate offline transactions, and those that have moved a significant part of the transaction online have failed to dominate the market. Here we discuss three themes that emerge from our interviews that provide an explanation of why the platform economy is limited in this case.

### Assessments of value are mainly qualitative

Platforms require quantitative data on cost and quality to supply information to market participants in order to compare offers. The importance of subtle qualitative distinctions in determining value is a widely acknowledged characteristic of creative work generally (Menger 1999, Lize et al. 2011). An examination of the most digitalized cases across our *digitalized agent* and *live music platforms* category confirms that quantifying quality is very difficult.

Several use comparison data such as user-generated star ratings, but most band profiles we viewed attracted few or no user-submitted ratings. One band at Alive Network (the largest digitalized agent), for example, received an unusually large number of ratings: 191 five-star ratings and 1 four-star ratings. Almost all ratings we saw were five-star, which provides little basis for quality comparison. More of the websites allow sorting by 'popularity' than by some clear user-generated measure of quality. Visitors seeking to compare offers therefore have to wade through large amounts of qualitative data: audio files, press photographs, video samples, and selected customer testimonials, all of which are attached to artists' profiles. While these may well be helpful in assessing an act's suitability, it militates against the transaction-accelerating feature of platforms.

Platforms are therefore unlikely to gain access to the highest-value market segments. Elite performers typically rely on particular agents with whom they have strong and exclusive trust relationships (DE Agent 2). In such cases, the agent usually has monopoly over access to the client, who seeks out the agent specifically because of their prestige (UK Agent 1). For most clients seeking creative musicians, such a time-consuming comparative procedure is not a viable option, and single video clips and audios do not offer valuable clues to the musicians' capacity to play before an audience (DE Agent 2). Consequently participants on

creative-oriented platforms remain at the *lower* end of work with less prestige. The exception that proves the rule here is Sofar Sounds, which has organised performances by globally recognised musicians, but only as part of sponsored promotional initiatives rather than inducing those artists to join their roster as a means of getting work (eg. Homewood, 2017).

In function work, we might reasonably expect this limit to be weaker since the acts advertised – tribute bands or groups playing well-established party repertoire – are more interchangeable (Umney and Kretsos 2014). However, it still appears that much function work remain within the networks of traditional agents due to their ongoing relationships with venues and events organizers, with more open platforms confined to smaller-scale one-off buyers (UK Agents 1). Certain platforms express the intention to break this divide (UK Agent 5), a point to which we return below.

In more creative-oriented market segments, the highest-profile artists are likely to be well-networked with trusted traditional agent-managers and as such be out of reach for platforms. Moreover, creative music is highly pocketed according to distinct artistic scenes which feature strong network ties and can be cliquish in nature (Umney and Kretsos, 2014). These networks and segments are all boundaries which slow and contain the progress of platformised forms. However, despite these limits, where forms of more limited partial digitalisation do exist, there are likely to be important effects on the live music labour market, as discussed in the final section.

These qualitative assessments of quality are all the more important given the high stakes of matching in live music. The monetary and emotional value of a wedding band is much greater than a single taxi ride, food delivery, or outsourced programming task. The stakes are also high for websites catering to creatives. Gigmit presents itself as Europe's biggest and most successful live music matching service offering the possibility to artists to become successful in the music business; Backstage Pro as a service for hard working musicians who want to build a career as a musical crafts person; and Sofaconcerts presents as a music scene insider that cares about artists and provides customers with a unique high-quality live music experience. Uber, Lyft, Deliveroo, and MTurk do not compete to structure their participants' lives in such a profound way. As one live music platform expressed it: "We create a certain expectation with our platform. Our core business is expectation management" (DE platform).

## The task is complex and contingent

A second limiting factor is that the task requires the transaction to be negotiated in more detail than can easily be done over a platform. For instance, interviewees referred to various questions which would vary from gig to gig, each of which requires adjustments to the fee, such as travel distance, waiting times, food for musicians, and repertoire. Acts and intermediaries are therefore reluctant to allow an entire transaction to be finalised over the platform: prices listed are usually starting points which need to be negotiated and approved either by the intermediary or the act themselves.

Function work is particularly susceptible to these kinds of contingencies, since the buyer is more likely to have requirements that could affect the price. Many sites have space on enquiry forms for the buyer to specify certain song requests, such as for a wedding first dance. Buyers may have precise requirements regarding performance times, including waiting times if a band is required to perform before and after a large function dinner with the potential to overrun. Accordingly, sites often prompt buyers to specify arrival and performance times as part of the initial enquiry, and the Musicians' Union itself encourages its members to ensure its contracts include highly specific arrival, performance, and packing up times. These factors also raise the question of whether food will be provided for acts during waiting times. This specific question does not appear on online enquiry forms, but it does matter to musicians. Bands themselves may seek to specify this in advance: for instance, one function band's own website includes the Frequently Asked Question:

Do we need to provide the band with food? Yes, food and soft drinks are required. Either as provided to the guests, or as £10 payment per head for a meal outside of the venue. There should also be somewhere comfortable for the band to change, eat and relax prior to the performance.

Other musicians have created a Facebook group dedicated to sharing good and bad experiences called *Gig Food – The Highs and Lows*, with approximately 500 members. Some digitalized agencies (such as Essence, quoted below) specifically criticise bands for expecting food and demand they lower their expectations in this respect. Food is thus an indeterminate part of function work, because it is so contested.

Certain platforms make allowances for contingencies, especially those specialized in function music. Some sites in both countries ask the client to specify their location, which generates an automatic adjustment to the initial quote. Some also enable acts to provide options for *packages* including different performance times. However, these features of the

site do not eliminate human oversight of the transaction; it merely adjusts the advertised fee using a few parameters.

In creative-oriented platforms, by contrast, the client does not make complex demands on time and repertoire. The small minority of sites that host payment procedures, such as ACTED (UK) and Sofaconcerts (DE), are ones that cater to this market segment. But even Sofaconcerts allows for these contingencies by leaving room for offline negotiation of price in line with unforeseen contingencies.

## **The organizational field is fragmented**

The lack of a single field of 'live music' limits the possibility of network effects and makes it impossible to benefit from the low cost of scaling up offered by platforms in other sectors. The supply side is not the problem, since musicians move between function and creative work sometimes on a daily basis (Umney and Kretsos, 2014), much like platform workers in other sectors who drift in and out of their fields (Forde et al., 2017). The problem in music is the fragmented nature of the buyers encountered, and the differing logics governing their interactions. There is no *one-stop shop* platform that aims to connect musicians across all different market segments, and musicians who work in both realms can easily use multiple intermediaries simultaneously.

Creative and function music differ in terms of pay (musicians expect less in creative music, cf. Umney and Kretsos, 2014) and the networks of buyers. In addition, function and creative music are fragmented internally both, horizontally and vertically. Several intermediaries on our list, most but not all of them listing sites, specialize in weddings, often alongside non-musical wedding services. There is also vertical differentiation in terms of pay and prestige. One traditional agent interviewed (UK Agent 1) emphasized that he saw newer platforms as occupying an entirely different market segment: one-off buyers for small functions (such as family parties or weddings) versus the larger-scale corporate work (such as ongoing deals with hotel chains or events companies) on which his company relied.

The boundaries of function and creative music are sometimes blurred in the subsegment of private concerts. Around 50 % of the gigs matched by one such platform we interviewed are combinations, ranging from creative music at events to very specific preference mixing original compositions with requested songs. Our interviewee recognizes the difference between function and creative music and states that blurring the distinction is deliberate:

There is also always a certain field of tension between the service gigs that usually bring in more money, and, let's say, the qualitatively higher gigs where it is about the artists themselves. I think we offer a good mix by not differentiating that clearly and get the best of both. We try to keep that open enough to give the artists the possibility to present themselves the way they think it is right (DE platform)

Other platforms are attempting to encroach on diverse market segments, with limited success. Gigmit, for example, started with a business-to-business model trying to digitalize the booking business with live music venues. After a change in the business model it seeks to position itself in a broad swathe at the bottom end of the hierarchy, including beginners and nonprofessional musicians, where prices are low, as the listed artists and available data show and several interviews confirm (DE Agent 2; DE DMS; DE musician). Others were seeking to extend themselves upmarket. At least two digitalized agency interviewees in the UK argued that their organisational strategy was to progress from one-off work to becoming preferred suppliers for larger events companies (UK Agents 3 and 5).

The larger platforms are attempting to encroach on the turf of traditional agents in another way as well: by taking on limited representation functions for a small number of selected artists on their roster, to whom they provide an entirely different service compared to standard platform members. Gigmit offers personalized services for musicians and for clients if they pay more, and they work also putting together sets of bands for festivals and other events with several artists (see website). Backstagepro works with smaller radio stations and newcomer/talent events (see website); Sofaconcerts promotes single artists/bands and does scouting for companies, advertisement, and film (see website and Facebook). Sofaconcerts has also a stronger social media presence than other German live music platforms and a much higher interaction on its Facebook site than other live music platforms. One UK digitalized agency, with several thousand bands signed-up, argued that, in the case of an elite 50–70 acts on the roster, they would offer recording space and more proactive prospecting for work including negotiating higher prices, thus taking on more traditional representative forms but for a select few (UK Agent 2). Another (UK agent 5) was also introducing representative functions for a small selected core of acts. The latter also has a highly visible social media presence; for instance it has a members' Facebook page with approaching 5,000 members, where management will respond directly to members' comments and complaints (for instance, providing tips on how to make their profile more attractive). In these cases, intermediaries extend their market reach to new echelons by inte-

grating new, largely separate functions, rather than scaling up the *platformised* side of their business itself.

## What are the consequences of digitalization for transactions?

Although live music markets have not been taken over by the platform economy, digitalization has altered transactions between customers and musicians in ways that have intensified competitive pressure on the latter. The intermediary changes from an artists' representative to a *transaction organizer* (Greer et al., forthcoming) that stages price-based competition. Based on our database and interviews we present three propositions about the consequences of these kinds of partial digitalisation for transactions. Each problem illustrates the difference between musician-oriented platforms in creative subsegments and client-oriented websites for function work.

### Digitalization leads to a client-facing business model that shifts risks onto musicians

Respondents at live music platforms oriented towards function work stressed that they saw themselves as *client-centred* rather than artist-centred. Their stated emphasis was on quickly arranging transactions to the satisfaction of customers, rather than acting as an advocate for musicians. This is made particularly explicit in the text that precedes the sign-up mechanism at one digitalised agent in Britain:

"Apart from the gigging essentials such as refreshments and a place to get changed etc, do you share our ethos that you are booked as a paid 'service' to the client and their guests (no different to caterers, florists or photographers)? We have a ZERO DIVA policy (we actually find the best musicians just get on with it). No other profession gets fed at work or demands hot meals on arrival. Of course, if you are at a venue for a long time (or have to set-up early) then of course we request a meal for you but it should always be seen as a bonus and never 'demanded' from our clients. (Music companies do talk to each other about band behaviour and some do have blacklists). When chatting to brides and grooms at wedding fayres, we hear time and time again that the single biggest thing that puts them off the idea of live music is the pre-conceived idea that bands (particularly singers) are 'too demanding or too much hassle'."

Another British website allows users to assign each other 'points' when they perform, which is intended to show the trustworthiness and activity levels of an act. In one case, there is even an automated disciplinary mechanism comparable to automatic disconnection as found in compa-

nies like Uber: the site gives acts *strikes* if they cancel a confirmed engagement. Three strikes and the act is disconnected from the site.

In understanding the consequences of the shift towards comparability in function work, it is helpful to differentiate between sites which display prices directly to buyers – approximately 30 % of our sample, including 20 German sites and 29 British ones – and those which do not (approximately 70 %). In the former case, musicians may lose the capacity to tailor their prices in response to their perception of the client's budget, foregoing opportunities to obtain better prices for their labour. A traditional agent would actively negotiate the best prices in relation to each buyer, and a German agent told us that prices were not listed to allow the negotiation of prices in line with the demands of the specific engagement (Agent 1). Note that a minority of traditional agents does display starting prices, and in these cases one may expect further negotiation amending this starting price to be overseen by the agent. However, managers at digitalised agencies explicitly disavowed this price negotiation function, arguing that it undermined their high-speed, high-volume customer service model (UK Agent 4). The musician, then, commits to a publicly-available price before being approached by the client, forfeiting the ability to advance their price demands, and thus intensifying the risk of underselling oneself. Interviews with musicians about these sites suggests this is a source of worry to them (Umney and Kretsos, 2014).

The situation is someone different for platforms catering to creative work. For instance, fees are rarely displayed on these sites. Potential clients may advertise gig opportunities, to which acts may attach their profiles by way of application. This may then either involve submitting their own fee, or the client may set a fee publicly in the advertisement. In this sense, there is less risk of the act being 'frozen' into particular fees, but greater risk of very low fees in general, as we show in the next section.

Another source of additional risk on a comparison-oriented model in function work is that musicians are required to invest in their own promotional materials – the electronic press kits – in order to gain access to sites, rather than agents supporting them in doing this as part of their investment in their artists. Most of our digitalized agency sites require these promotional materials on signing up, and they appear, particularly among digitalized agents, to be the primary criterion for allowing bands onto an agency's books. As Meier (2017) has shown with reference to recorded music, the need to develop these promotional resources as a pre-requisite for accessing intermediaries is a major and risk-laden investment for musicians which has been intensified as a consequence of digitalisation. Note that in the more open platforms in creative market

segments, sign-up is more likely to be immediate without any quality control. In this sense, full 'platformisation' in creative work arguably mitigates risk compared to some of the sites of agents, which demand more resources from musicians as a pre-requisite for acceptance.

## Intensification of price competition

Musicians' own testimony regarding digitalized agents reveals concerns about intensified competitive pressure over fee rates (Umney, 2017). On function-oriented sites that enable direct price comparison, we can expect pressure on musicians to advertise low fees, since this enables them to stand out against others, particularly where buyers can sort acts by price or filter according to anticipated budget. Once again this was stated explicitly by interviewees, who testified that a recurrent part of their jobs in dealing with musicians was counselling them to lower price expectations to access more work (UK Agencies 3 and 4). In discussions on the Facebook site of one UK digitalized agency, even some musicians suggested to other musicians that complained about the low number of gigs matched through the site to lower their fees. The answer put forward by quite experienced musicians was that they had advertised lower fees before and it did not make any difference regarding the customers they were able to find.

Displaying prices can, but does not inevitably, produce pressure towards lower-cost models in which musicians work for less. Among the function-oriented sites that display prices, there is wide variation. Some, while ostensibly allowing price comparison, tend to feature a much smaller range of acts, suggesting a higher degree of selectivity, in which going rates tend to be clustered around a much higher level. For instance, one price-displaying site features only four bands, all ranged between 1,000 and 1,200, and another features 20 bands, with the lowest-priced four-piece band being 1,500. Both of these are regional specialists (Manchester and London respectively). Likewise in the UK, a Midlands-specific agency has 7 bands with the lowest-priced four-piece being 1,450, and a South Wales-based agency with 15 bands where the cheapest four-piece is 1,240. The variation between and within German sites is similar.

An examination of the rosters of some of the more open sites allowing price comparison functions reveals British acts advertising themselves at a starting fee significantly below the approximate £150 per band member fee, which is both an MU guideline and a more informally-propagated *going rate* (Umney, 2016). One site, with around 3,000 acts

in total, offers 1,320 wedding bands across the UK: when open search terms within this category are used, these are displayed across 88 pages of search results. When these are sorted in ascending order of price, on the first page of results can be found a trio with a starting price of £35, a quartet with a starting price of £100, and it is not until the 37th page of results that the asking price for a quartet hits £600. £100 for a quartet is a rate which has previously been considered unthinkable for functions in previous studies (Umney and Kretsos, 2014). This example is relatively exceptional, likely testifying to freelance musicians' self-regulation over prices for function work (Umney, 2016). Moreover, this aspect appears influenced by size and selectivity, and the site just described is one of the largest and least-selective of those sites which enable sorting by price. Some sites which enable price comparison feature also relatively consistent price lists across the roster which generally exceed these rates: however, these tend to be smaller ones with apparently more selective entry criteria; such as the regional agencies mentioned previously.

In creative market segments the situation is different. Firstly, pay rates on creative-oriented platforms entirely collapse. When posting offers as a client or venue, users are typically given the option to specify a fee or select an option such as *no fee* or *percentage of ticket sales*. As such, it is normal to see gigs offered at negligible rates of pay. Backstage Pro, one of the biggest digital matching services in Germany and mainly focused on newcomer bands and non-professional creative music, offers almost exclusively opportunities to play for *door deals* (percentage of ticket sales) or no fee beyond transport costs, as do various UK-based live music platforms. These websites increase competition by offering a way for amateur musicians who previously did not have the services of an agent to gain access to an already crowded market. Platforms thus reproduce on a larger scale the anarchy and hyper-competitiveness that already characterize the market for live creative music.

One notable exception here is Sofar Sounds. Here, events organised by the platform either provide a percentage of ticket sales, or impose a £75 flat fee for acts. This, aside from the extremely low level of the fee – which would be half the MU rate even if it were for an individual rather than a band – is notable because it is a rare case where fees are unilaterally dictated by the platform itself. In this sense, it more closely resembles a system like Uber, where the company unilaterally sets rates of pay. However this model is a unique case in our survey, albeit one with backing from major multinational platform capitalists like Uber and AirBnB.

## Covert forms of profiteering by intermediaries

We also stress that some of the more problematic aspects of larger-scale comparison-oriented intermediaries, are not associated with the consequences of platformisation per se, but rather reflect the continuation and replication of other kinds of profit-extraction strategy: those which rely on the absence of transparent information rather than its intensification. Digitalization allows these strategies to be recapitulated on a larger scale.

For instance, where prices are not displayed, price competition is by definition less transparent and thus potentially less fierce. However, in function-oriented sites, we found evidence that other forms of covert profit-extraction are facilitated in these cases. For instance, one agent stated that, upon receiving an enquiry from a customer, they would keep acts' stated price secret and negotiate as high a fee as possible, keeping the difference as a commission (the size of which would also be concealed from both client and act) (UK Agency 2). Others argued that this was common practice while denying doing it themselves (UK Agency 5). These reflect long-running profit-extraction methods in live music, but also capitalise on the greater access to musicians provided by the internet. One interviewee (UK Agency 2), described a working method: typically, they would ask musicians what price they would expect when they signed up, without displaying this to potential buyers. When a query was raised, they would get the highest budget they could from the buyer, without telling the musician. Any difference goes direct to the intermediary. Other interviewees (UK Agent 1; UK Agent 5) testified that this was widespread in the industry. One interviewee (UK Agency 4), said "We could charge 100 % [commissions] if we wanted to" but stressed they were deterred from this by the prospect of reputational damage.

On other occasions, an agent might receive a budget from a customer, which could be unrealistic compared to musicians' going rates. Instead of advising the customer to propose a higher budget, the agent may then contact bands and try to recruit them for this original price, as described by Umney (2017) and a musician interviewee (UK Musician). Some agents' sites in Germany offered to configure bands according to budget and music preferences. With a lower budget, the agent would reduce the number of members of the live band (with consequences for the quality of the music and the range of music that can be presented). In such cases, the role of the intermediary becomes akin to a purchasing agent operating on behalf of the client vis-à-vis the musician, rather than vice versa. In this sense, the exploitative potential of these sites lies di-

rectly in the human interlocution and would be much more difficult in a more authentic platform-type model.

In this respect, we expect this kind of covert profit extraction to be less prevalent in creative-oriented sites which facilitate more direct buyer-client contact without an interlocutor. The main issue is the fee-for-service model; while the amount of fee that the musician pays is clear, the precise service to be expected is less clear. The problems posed in these cases are more *transparent* but equally challenging.

## Conclusions

Above we have sketched the limits of the platform economy by looking at live music, where employment has long been organized as temporary gigs but where platforms have not taken over. Live music is in some ways similar to the economy characterized by theorists of platform capitalism. The existence of digitalized intermediaries in live music shows that the technical preconditions for platforms exist here, and some intermediaries found investment as part of the recent tech boom in connection with huge amounts of surplus capital, with one even forming a partnership with Uber. The opaque and chaotic market in live music was a source of discontent with existing intermediaries, especially among musicians on the supply side.

We observed some digitalization of live music intermediaries. Some were far more open than traditional agents, provided customer ratings, displayed prices, facilitated quick and direct communication between clients and musicians, and even compiled and displayed data from social media. However, most of the sites we looked at simply facilitated offline transactions between buyer and seller or organized by traditional intermediaries, agents. Where they displayed a lot of information it was in a cumbersome way that did not facilitate quick price and quality comparisons. We found that it is extremely rare that the platform handles payment, and when it does, there is an offline component as well. Without exception, these websites occupy particular niches rather than taking over all of live music: bands seeking members, function bands seeking work at weddings or corporate events, or creative musicians seeking work in clubs, festivals, and/or private homes.

To explain the lack of platformization in live music we point to three features of this market: the inherently qualitative way in which value is assessed, the complexity and contingency of the task, and the fragmentation of the organizational field.

More digitalized intermediaries tend to shift away from a worker representation role, become more client-facing, and move towards simulating price-based competition. For transactions this has three tangible consequences: a shift of risk onto musicians, downward pressure on prices, and, in some cases, the continuation and expansion of covert forms of profiteering by intermediaries. We find, however, that their importance differs between different kinds of platforms: whether they specialize in creative or function music, and whether they are at the high or low end of the market.

Our study has several limitations that are worth noting as possible avenues for future research. While we can provide an overview of pres-

asures reported on musicians and changes in transactions, our research methods do not enable us to make claims about trajectories of pay rates in live music. This could be dealt with by a more systematic analysis of these sites. Nor can we claim to have uncovered the means of improving musicians' wages and working conditions through collective bargaining, legislation, or cooperatives. Past studies have shown that independent workers who are not collectively organized are in favour of organization in principle (Azzellini, 2002), but the musicians we met were not engaged collectively and the trade unionists we met were not organizing platform workers. Future research could look in different countries to identify models for musician self-organizing. Third, we have not fully explored how these platforms realize returns for investors, in part because so much of the profit extraction is covert. This lack of transparency is an important grievance for musicians and further interviews with musicians and platforms could shed valuable light on how digitalization changes the way that surpluses are skimmed from live music.

For trade union practice, our study has four implications.

First, unions organizing musicians should take platforms seriously. In both countries, trade unions don't really see the kinds of acts getting work via these platforms as their constituency; ver.di does not see freelance musicians generally as part of its constituency. The UK Musicians' Union does, but places an emphasis on *quality control* which distinguishes between its members and the kinds of people working via platforms (though we question whether this distinction can realistically be made, since many freelance MU workers will rely on these agencies for work). There has been little attempt to collectively bargain with these kinds of sites. Arguably this is reasonable, given that these platforms are confined to particular parts of the music business and the most highly digitalized ones are those aimed at semi-professional and creatives. The result, however, is that working musicians with grievances have no collective recourse. Organizing independent workers is a complex task. Even if they are in favour of organization, they are reluctant to traditional union models of representation. While favouring more active agency, independent workers lack a physical workplace bringing them together at a particular time (Azzellini, 2002). A strategic reorientation, and perhaps an attitudinal change, on the part of unions is needed for freelance musicians affected by platforms to have a voice.

Second, there are emerging actions by platform workers in other areas that have lessons for musicians. One site run by academics and activists, Notes from Below, has featured some insightful coal-face discussion of mobilising platform workers (Notes from Below Collective, 2018). Much of the discussion surrounds strikes, which may not be relevant to

live musicians, especially those working one-off function gigs. But Marotta (2018) emphasizes the need for unions to act as mobilising resources identifying and framing shared grievances across supposedly quite disparate groups of workers.

Third, we can provide some idea of what the grievances are. Competitive pressures to lower fees are an important concern, and unions could look to enforce minimum rates of pay or demand transparency in prices on platforms. Enforcement of minima will be more difficult with creatives than with function musicians, but the demand for transparency will appeal to both. Another grievance is a lack of social security entitlements. Germany's Künstlersozialkasse (KSK) handles retirement, health, and accident insurance for artists, including freelance musicians, but it is under-funded. Unions should examine the question of whether platforms are paying into KSK, and there are some proposals in Germany to build social security contributions into online payments (Weber, 2018). A third grievance is the covert nature of some profiteering. Unions could demand that platforms disclose not only fees paid to musicians, but also the fees that they receive from clients. Finally, the contingent nature of the work creates all kinds of risks that musicians often bear. While some platforms provide a financial buffer to musicians in the event of last-minute cancellations, not all of them do. These grievances can be addressed both to platforms themselves and to the government as regulator. In this context unions and political actors should insist that public funds (national and EU) for platforms are linked to transparent practices and that companies do not bypass government regulations of the employment relationship and do not actively avoid paying taxes.

Finally, unions should support the creation of intermediaries that improve the terms of exchange on the labour market and demand that public funds are also made available for such initiatives. Scholz (2016) recommends the development of union-sponsored or cooperative labour brokerages for platform work to replace exploitative ones. Fairtrade Music Seattle provides information on clubs and a certification scheme that publicizes good actors, but it does not function as an intermediary shaping the matching of supply and demand on the market. Musicians' unions should consider supporting better online platforms.

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Online platforms have disrupted parts of the capitalist economy, with allegedly severe consequences in the world of work. This study examines live music in Germany and the UK, where online platforms do not dominate, despite considerable digitalization of market intermediaries. The analysis shows that, as the degree of digitalization increases, matching services tend to work less as a workers' representative – which is traditionally the case for live music agents – and more as a force of marketization that disciplines workers by orchestrating price-based competition.

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