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Performing Numbers

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Abstract

This chapter explores the implications of performance metrics as a source of self-knowledge and self-presentation. It does so through the figure of the contemporary musician. As performers on-stage and online, musicians are constantly assessed and evaluated by industry actors, peers, music fans, and themselves. The impact of powerful modes of quantification on personal experiences, understandings, and practices of artistic creation provides insight into the wider role that metrics play in shaping how we see ourselves and others; and how we present ourselves to others. Through in-depth interviews with emerging musicians, this chapter thus uses the artist as a lens through which to understand everyday life within the “performance complex.”

Keywords

musicians, metrics, self-knowledge, self-presentation, self-worth, commensuration

Performing Numbers

Musicians and their Metrics

Robert Prey

“Slenderbodies” are a guitar-driven, indie pop duo. At least that is how the California-based musical act *used to* describe themselves, until they discovered that many of their listeners consider them to be, in fact, electronic artists. “We fall into categories like ‘Chill Pop’ and ‘Chill Vibes,’” remarks the clearly surprised guitarist. “Maybe there’s a future for us doing some DJ sets on the side rather than just playing full live musician sets with a live band.”

On the surface, this seems like a relatively banal and commonplace occurrence: an artist considers reorienting their art in light of feedback from fans. But this particular admission occurs in an instructional video entitled “How to Read your Data” produced by the music streaming platform Spotify. Seemingly borrowing from the “Quantified Self” mantra—“self-knowledge through numbers”—Spotify promises to provide artists like Slenderbodies with “all kinds of data to help you see how you’re doing.” As Spotify User Researcher Kamaya Jones concludes: “Data can help you learn things that maybe you hadn’t thought of before” (Spotify for Artists n.d.).

How do we come to know ourselves? A standard response is that we can only know ourselves through others. But who are these “others”? Certainly, they include our families, friends, colleagues, and the strangers we meet and interact with throughout our everyday encounters. But should we so limit the sources of our selves?

C12.P4

This chapter explores the implications of a source of self-knowledge and self-presentation that is increasingly difficult to ignore: performance metrics. We live in a world saturated and shaped by such metrics. As academics we are all too familiar with the i10-index, the h-index, and our overall citation counts. As social media users we privately wonder why a friend's post received so many "likes," or why a colleague has more followers. Our work and our personal lives are thus entangled with processes of measurement and associated rankings, ratings, and performance metrics. These metrics, it will be argued, increasingly shape how we see ourselves and others; and how we present ourselves to others.

C12.P5

Some commentators have argued that we are witnessing a renewed faith in numbers (Beer 2016; Kennedy and Hill 2018). In part, this can be attributed to the broader phenomenon of "datafication"—the ability to render into data aspects of our lives that have never before been quantifiable (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger 2013). While quantification has long engendered faith or trust by acting as "a technology of distance" (Porter 1995), the rise of social media and the "platformization" (Helmond 2015; Poell et al., 2017) of the web has seemingly brought about a new intimacy to our relationship with numbers and metrics. We live *in* social media, rather than merely *with* social media (Deuze 2011), yet there has been a lack of research into the relationship between metrics, self-worth, and self-presentation. Benjamin Grosser (2014) describes how Facebook activates the desire for "*more* 'likes', *more* comments, and *more* friends." As a result, "value becomes attached to quantification, worth is synonymous with quantity" (Kennedy 2016: 150). But there is still much work to be done on how individual actors

engage with data on a daily basis in a way that foregrounds their agency and reflexivity (Couldry and Powell 2014).¹

C12.P6

Musicians provide us with a potentially fruitful case study through which to explore this sensitive and confusing terrain. Music and musicians have long been seen as cultural forerunners (Attali 1985; Baym 2018). In particular, as Nancy Baym (2018: 7) points out, “the tensions (musicians) face as they try to negotiate the boundaries of their relationships with audiences, and the strategies they devise to manage these tensions, have implications for workers in countless fields.” In this way, “musicians may thus be something of a barometer of current trends” (Haynes and Marshall 2018: 459).

C12.P7

To the contemporary musician, it would indeed seem as if all the world’s a stage. Through social media platforms such as Facebook, and streaming platforms like YouTube or Spotify, artists perform for their audiences. In turn, the metrics generated from these “performances” are increasingly important determinants of self-knowledge, self-worth, and career viability in an

¹ One promising line of research in this area is the “social analytics” approach developed by Nick Couldry and others. Social analytics is “a sociological treatment of how analytics get used by a range of social actors in order to meet their social ends” (Couldry et al. 2016: 119). Such an approach aims to capture how data is reflexively incorporated into daily practice or discarded, and how adjustments are made at the individual and organizational level in relation to analytics. As a recently developed research paradigm, social analytics has been mainly used to study data practices in civic (Baack 2015), community (Couldry et al. 2016), and public sector (Kennedy 2016) organizations, but as Couldry and Powell (2014: 3) point out, this approach “has the potential to be expanded to many more areas.”

increasingly data-driven music industry. As performance metrics more seamlessly interpenetrate everyday life, new anxieties are provoked, and coping strategies are developed.

C12.P8 The research that this chapter draws upon is part of a larger project about the role of datafication and performance metrics that includes interviews with (to date) thirty-five music industry stakeholders. Fourteen of those interviews have been conducted with musicians. These in-depth interviews provide the empirical material for this chapter.² In particular, the relationship artists have with their performance metrics will be examined. As a lens through which to understand life within the “performance complex,” this chapter focuses on the impact of powerful modes of quantification on personal experiences, understandings, and practices of artistic performance.

C12.S1 **The Show That Never Ends**

C12.P9 Before the invention of audio recording in the nineteenth century, music required the presence of a musician. As Jacques Attali wrote of the medieval “jongleur”: “[h]e was music and the spectacle of the body. He alone created it, carried it with him, and completely organized its circulation within society” ([1985]: 14). The musician, in other words, was inextricable from the performance.

C12.P10 Edison’s phonograph and the subsequent development of vinyl records, cassettes, music videos, compact discs, and other media of music, expanded and exploded the notion of performance ([Attali 1985]). This has empowered musicians in many ways. No longer was the

² My gratitude to Marc Esteve Del Valle, Rosa Kremer, and Antti Kailio for research assistance with several of these interviews.

performance or the performer limited to a stage bound in time and space. The scratchy lo-fi recordings of a New Orleans Depression-era blues guitarist could find an audience in 1950s London, or Hanoi in the 2020s.

C12.P11 While the mediated performance has provided musicians with incredible resources through which to extend their selves and their art, it has at the same time also induced no small degree of anxiety. Performance, as [Bauman (1984: 11)] writes, typically involves “an assumption of accountability to an audience.” But the ephemeral and enigmatic nature of the non-present audience made it difficult to be accountable.³ Who is listening? What do they think?

C12.P12 This has changed over the past two decades as performances have moved online. From personal websites to MySpace and then Facebook pages; from Spotify profiles to YouTube channels; the range and type of spaces where musicians “perform” has been dramatically extended and expanded. At the same time these new performance spaces have provided musicians with detailed quantifiable insight into audiences and their consumption practices. The data trail that used to end at the record store checkout counter now includes every song skip or repeat, every thumb up or thumb down, and every social media “like” or share. Streaming platforms like Spotify help artists “get to know” their fans through free features such as “Spotify for Artists”—which presents a wealth of insights into fans and their listening practices. Likewise, billing itself as “the biggest stage on earth,” “YouTube for Artists” provides in-depth analytics

³ As many scholars have recognized, mediated performances require that the audience be first imagined ([Litt 2012]). The “imagined audience” is no fantasy, but rather a careful construction ([Ang 1991]; [Cook and Teasley 2011]; [Marwick and boyd 2010]), generated from cues “given off” ([Goffman 1959]) by audiences. For much of the twentieth century, a central cue for the recorded music industry was the sales figure. Musicians themselves, however, rarely had direct access to these figures ([Baym 2013]).

for artists to monitor the performance of their content on the platform. Other social media platforms popular with musicians also provide tools, such as Facebook’s “Audience Insights.”

C12.P13 Once measured, a performer and a performance can be compared to other performers and performances. Like other industries, the contemporary recording industry is turning to data to help “rationalize” decision-making in an attempt to recover from declining revenues and increasing uncertainty. The recorded music industry is employing these new forms and sources of data to predict preferences (Morris 2015) and to measure success (Collins and O’Grady 2016). Increasingly, decisions on which artists to sign to a recording contract, where to tour, which bands to book, or even which tracks to release, are being influenced by such data (Hu 2018).

C12.P14 Datafication can be thus understood as an attempt to rationalize the “irrationality” (Ryan 2010) of the creative process. However, it would be premature and one-sided to end the discussion there. While the tensions between creative and commercial decisions in music and other cultural industries have been explored by many scholars (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Negus 1992), datafication introduces a new dynamic; further mediating the social worlds (Couldry and Hepp 2016) of artists and challenging how artists see themselves and their work.

C12.P15 As we will discover below, musicians begin to see themselves, and their peers, through the lens of performance metrics. These metrics are readily displayed alongside the performance, to the degree that they become part and parcel of the performance. Indeed, the experience of being a musician is increasingly mediated *through* performance metrics. It is through performance metrics that a musician comes to know herself as a performer—and to see herself as a competitor within a field of competition. It is also through these metrics that the performer is reunited with her performance, with all the anticipation and anxiety that accompanies any reunion.

C12.S2

Metrics as Introduction

C12.P16

Discussing Spotify's display of track streams, "Elsa"—a Finnish pop singer signed to Universal Music—explained the impression that this prominent metric creates:

C12.P17

. . . you can assess the music based on (numbers). If it's someone who has under a thousand (streams) – which is not even specified on Spotify – and you compare it with someone with hundreds of thousands or million streams, you will immediately get a presumption about the music. Even though that less-than-a-thousand thing might be a pure diamond.

C12.P18

As Elsa, and everyone interviewed, clearly understands, metrics are not merely about measure. Artists are not only evaluated through their metrics; they are also introduced through their metrics. For example, prominently displayed below an artist's name and image on their Spotify profile is a metric: monthly listeners. Immediately below this number is a list of five "Popular" tracks, with the precise number of times each track has been played, or streamed. Ostensibly, this is to help guide users in deciding which track to select. But the visibility of such metrics fulfills another purpose, introducing the track by way of its accomplishments. Likewise, artists are also "known" by their numbers. As one member of a Dutch indie rock band remarked:

Nowadays you can see how big a band is. You know by the likes on Facebook how big the band is. So (you can say) "Oh but they're nothing. They only have 1000 likes".

C12.P20

The performance thus does not begin when the listener or viewer hits play on a track or a music video. The performance instead begins with the number of streams, plays, likes, or shares

displayed alongside the content. In preceding the performance, performance metrics form an integral part of how the performer and the performance will be judged. Musicians are of course very aware of this. For Elsa and for many of the musicians interviewed, metrics are not merely a representation of a performance, they are part of the performance itself. Metrics form a frame through which the artist or the particular track is perceived. Elsa continues by comparing this to the offline equivalent of the music streaming platform—the record store:

C12.P21 Even if you would go to a record store, and they have their album lists, and the number one spot says something of course, but it's still very different. There's still so many records that you don't know anything about. Are they popular or not? Does anyone buy them? But in Spotify you can see it right away.

C12.P22 Several of the artists interviewed said that they felt conflicted about the transparency of online music consumption and the generalization of rankings it affords. As music listeners they appreciated the guidance these metrics provided: the visibility of streams or “likes” helped them to make song choices when they discovered a new artist. As musicians, however, they worried that they were being evaluated by their metrics instead of by their music; or rather, that their music would be perceived through the lens of these performance metrics.⁴

⁴ Of course, this is precisely how the algorithms that organize and recommend music on such platforms evaluate or “perceive” music, since recommendation algorithms tend to pick up and amplify attention on what is popular (Baym 2018: 160).

Comparing and Competing

C12.S3

C12.P23

Social media researchers have long pointed out that on platforms such as Twitter, “[t]he ability to attract and command attention becomes a status symbol” (Marwick and boyd 2010: 127). Status is performed through the prominent display of one’s “followers”: “a quantifiable metric for social status” (Marwick and boyd 2010: 127). While in the music world charts have long offered musicians the promise of status, in reality only a highly select few ever qualified for this form of elite ranking. However, today the same platforms that allow ordinary citizens to have an audience also permit “ordinary” artists to count, and to compare, their audiences.

C12.P24

In place of any essentialist measure of success, musicians generally evaluate their own performance by comparing their metrics to other artists. Indeed, the very existence of metrics, as Espeland and Lom (2015: 19) point out, “make it almost impossible *not* to compare.” As the authors of a recent report on British musicians’ mental health and well-being write, “social media [is] often the vehicle through which [musicians] observe the achievements of others, and . . . compare their own fortunes to that of their peers and competitors” (Gross et al. 2018: 17).

C12.P25

“Hank”—a singer-songwriter based in the Netherlands—revealed that he was quite happy with the spike in his Facebook metrics that followed his performance on “De Wereld Draait Door”—a Dutch talk show that has a live music segment:

C12.P26

We got around 400 likes that first day, on Facebook, from 1400 followers. That’s a good score! I saw other bands that have, like, 14,000 followers on Facebook and they played the same show and got 300 (likes), or something.

C12.P27

Here Hank is determining the “success” of his performance through comparison. The fact that his ratio of likes-to-followers was higher than another band that played the same show is judged to be a “good score” and sufficient evidence of a successful performance. But this was not a “fair” competition: pleasure is derived, and success is defined in relation to the asymmetry of the competition. As Hank continues:

C12.P28

It was also a pleasant surprise because you kind of feel like the underdog, with less ‘likes’ than some other bands who are much bigger and have 4 or 5 times your spread, and then you’re able to beat them on the same stuff.

C12.P29

While this example points to the pervasiveness and constancy of competition in an era when metrics are produced and displayed in real time, it also highlights the existence of periodic tournaments. From time to time, an “underdog” artist may be able to compete head-on with a “bigger” artist, and perhaps even “beat them on the same stuff.”

C12.P30

However, the performance metrics available on social media and other platforms not only enable musicians to compare themselves to other artists, but also to *construct* the very peer group that they will compete and compare themselves with. For example, “Stefan”—a Dutch musician with a strong presence on YouTube—mentioned that he only compares himself to contemporaries who are also “big” on social media platforms.

C12.P31

I would not compare myself to an artist that is not active on social media, on Instagram or something. (*mentions a fellow artist*) . . . He’s big on Instagram. He’s

a creative boy. I see a lot of similarities. Maybe his music is different but, like, everything around it is already very much overlapping.

C12.P32

Genre has long been the primary mode through which artists are categorized, and the dominant means through which artists identify themselves and their peer group. What is interesting in the quote above, and in several other interviews, is how metrics (“big on Instagram”) appear to provide an alternative way of (self) organization. Of course, this does not mean that genre is being superseded by numbers. But in recent years, various automated tools have been introduced to commensurate artists through particular performance metrics rather than through traditional modes of categorization, such as genre or record label. For example, the music industry analytics service “Next Big Sound” has introduced “Weekly Performance Insights.” This tool represents “how an artist is performing on different platforms compared to all other artists with similarly-sized audiences on each of those platforms.” Next Big Sound has also created a benchmarking feature that places individual artists in one of five stages based on the size of their fan base: “undiscovered,” “promising,” “established,” “mainstream,” or “epic.”⁵ While it permits artists to compare their performance to comparable artists, the key point is that this type of benchmarking tool also works to construct the very peer group that an artist can be compared to—with audience size being the key variable.

⁵ As [Next Big Sound \(2016\)](#) explains on its website: “We used a clustering technique to identify patterns of behavior over the past 180 days, and set benchmarks for performance using median values for the ideal performance group within each stage.”

Making Sense of Metrics

C12.S4

C12.P33

The example above hints at the centrality of automated processes of “commensuration” in both the production and consumption of performance metrics. Commensuration—“the transformation of different qualities into a common metric” (Espeland and Stevens 1998: 314)—brings different objects together by transforming all differences into quantity, and in turn, allowing objects to be distinguished from each other only in terms of quantity. As a social process, commensuration is often unacknowledged and unrecognized, yet it is “crucial to how we categorize and make sense of the world” (Espeland and Stevens 1998: 314).

C12.P34

Processes of commensuration tend to reveal themselves most clearly in times of socio-technical change, which of course perfectly describes the state of the contemporary music industry. As David Weiszfeld (2016), founder of the music industry market intelligence platform Soundcharts writes: “Our industry has gone through a revolution and today there is no framework, no standard practice to monitor an artist’s performance.” Is a Facebook video view equal to a YouTube view? What should the ratio of “likes” to views be? How many song skips on Spotify are acceptable? These routine questions often create heated debates between managers and labels and can influence whether an artist is signed to a contract or dropped from a festival lineup.

C12.P35

However, the process of commensuration begins long before musicians, or other industry actors, begin looking at Spotify streams or Instagram followers. As Carolin Gerlitz and Bernhard Rieder (2018: 530) point out, commensuration occurs “at the moment users encounter technical interfaces that channel their activities into predefined forms and functions.” Every time a listener “skips” a track on Spotify, gives a YouTube video a “thumbs up,” or “likes” a band on

Facebook, an amorphous instance of affect is transformed into a fixed and measurable entity. In this regard, platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, and Facebook can be seen as commensuration machines: users “inscribe themselves into the spaces of possibility produced and delineated by software” (Gerlitz and Rieder 2018: 530). A listener might skip one song because she detests it; another song because she heard it too many times today. Spotify does not distinguish in its transformation of these different qualities into a common metric. This process of commensuration is largely invisible to anyone outside of these platforms. The clean and countable metrics that present themselves in the front-end hide the “messiness” of myriad programming decisions in the back-end.

C12.P36 Nevertheless, in my interviews with musicians, several expressed an understanding of how platforms attempt to produce equivalence. Hank pointed out how different platforms encourage and measure engagement differently. As a result, he makes a distinction between the ratio of “likes” to “views” on Facebook, and on other platforms like YouTube:

C12.P37 I think there’s a difference between really watching a video (on YouTube) and just scrolling over it and it starts playing (on Facebook) because that’s counted as a view too.

C12.P38 This musician also expressed that he does not want to take the “likes” he receives too seriously because he can’t assume the same intention behind every “like”:

C12.P39 Maybe they just click away. There’s not a real reason. Maybe it’s just, “this guy is from my city and he’s on the radio. How cool.”.

C12.P40 As Hank fully recognizes, the apparent transparency of online feedback such as a simple “like,” is betrayed by the range of possible interpretations it permits. The “like” button, [Carolyn Gerlitz and Anne Helmond \(2013\)](#): 1358) point out is “a one-click shortcut to express a variety of affective responses such as excitement, agreement, compassion, understanding, but also ironic and parodist liking.”

C12.P41 This affective collapse of different responses into one standardized metric is compared by Hank to the more contextualized feedback he receives during and after offline performances:

C12.P42 When you’re playing at a venue and people come over to you and say they like your songs, or your voice and how the band plays together. Or even if they don’t like it.

There’s a reason behind it, and the night itself, and the venue, and how it went, and how you think it went.

C12.P43 Between musicians, “likes” are also sometimes understood as a currency of exchange. “Rosa”—a Dutch trip-hop artist—explained:

C12.P44 When another artist, like a friend of mine, has a new single, I will “like” it, for them. But I talked to people and they said, I saw your video but they didn’t press “like,” so I thought, “why not?”

C12.P45 Media scholars have recognized the “pervasive sense of reciprocity” that drives many interactions in online communities of creators ([Duffy 2019](#)). While some of these interactions

may be strategic attempts to elicit greater engagement with one's own content, they also signal genuine attempts to build communities between creators. This appears to be Rosa's intention. However, by "liking" a musician friend's new song this then creates an expectation that her friend will do the same for the content she uploads. When this exchange breaks down it can lead to a sense of confusion and even dismay.

C12.P46 Once again, we see how metrics such as the ubiquitous "like" cannot simply be understood as representative indicators. This is not only because they are a "one-click shortcut," but also because they are utilized as mechanisms for community-building and strategic self-enhancement. Performance metrics are thus themselves always performative.

C12.P47 This discussion also reveals the complex negotiation between people and platforms, and between tools and their users, in making sense of data. As [Couldry and Hepp \(2016: 134\)](#) point out, "platforms *feel* like 'spaces' where . . . we encounter others, but their existence is shaped by the underlying operation of platform software and its calculative infrastructure." There is always something that goes missing in the translation of social action into data, and data into (self) knowledge. As many scholars ([Couldry and Hepp 2016](#); [van Dijck 2013](#)) have pointed out, problems arise when data are treated as direct knowledge of the social world, or when metrics are seen as simply "by-products of communication" ([Baym 2013](#)).

C12.P48 In particular, from the interviews we can see the difficulties artists experience in commensurating between online and offline performances. At a live performance, Rosa's friends would more than likely clap or cheer in response to her music, so she cannot understand why they fail to properly register their approval on Facebook through the online equivalent of a round of applause: a "like." Online social norms and expectations of reciprocity are still in an early stage of development. The importance of developing shared understandings of the performer-fan

relationship in online performance space is not simply a problem of etiquette. Indeed, what is at stake is an artist's sense of self-worth and professional value.

C12.P49 Rosa expressed how disappointed she was by reactions to her new music video: "I sponsored the video [on Facebook] so I had like 1500 plays or something, but there were only 25 likes." For her, this seemed like a very small number of "likes" for so many views. She was profoundly disillusioned by the "fact" that, as she put it, "[s]o many people saw the video but did nothing":

C12.P50 I started thinking; is it not good enough? You know, the usual thoughts . . . I felt quite insecure for a few days, and then I felt like, oh man, what am I doing, I don't want to do this anymore. I lost my drive a bit.

C12.S5 **Feeling Metrics**

C12.P51 Despite some research on this topic (see [Baym 2013](#)) we still know very little about how musicians feel about their metrics, and how metrics makes them feel. Many of the artists interviewed for this project appear to welcome increased and real-time insight into who their fans are, where they are located, and what songs they appreciate most. Commenting on how exciting it was to see the live listener count for her new album through the Spotify for Artists portal, "Olivia"—an Irish singer-songwriter—exclaimed "I love statistics!" Most interviewees, however, were less enthusiastic and displayed a complicated and deeply personal relationship with their performance metrics:

C12.P52 In Spotify you can see how many people listen to your song right now and that's also quite horrible actually . . . Or very wonderful. But actually I'm trying to stay away from there . . . It's the immediate feedback of your work. Back in the old days you had to wait for sales numbers for ages. (Elsa)

C12.P53 This comment about the immediacy of feedback was noted by several interviewees. Some of them described this as a “double-edged sword.” As Elsa continued:

C12.P54 Unfortunately, popularity is the kind of thing that you can't operate without, commercially that is. So [performance metrics] are important but on a personal level it sucks obviously because it's so brutal that you get that feedback right away. It is like a double-edged sword.

C12.P55 A recent large-scale survey on the mental health of British musicians revealed extremely high levels of self-reported depression (68.5 percent) and anxiety (71 percent) amongst musicians. Alongside long-standing dangers of financial instability, the authors of the report pay particular attention to what they call “a feedback economy of relentless opinion and criticism” (Gross and Musgrave 2016: 17). While significant attention has been paid to the abuses and harms caused by social media commenting (Koutamanis et al. 2015), metrics provide feedback that is seemingly less personal, and thus less hurtful. However, the apparent objectivity of numbers is precisely what makes them so effective as seeds for self-doubt: metrics cannot be so easily dismissed as the errant rantings of an isolated individual. As Rosa admitted to me: “I'm not

really insecure a lot, but . . . I'm a bit insecure by these numbers. And that's quite stupid because they're just numbers, but . . ."

C12.P56 As her voice trails off, Rosa emphasizes the point she is making: performance metrics are not "just numbers." They are a marker and a maker of a musician's "sense of self-worth and professional value" (Baym 2013). The potential effects on a musician's mental health and well-being are significant. When asked how well she can recite her Spotify streaming numbers, Finnish pop musician Elsa replies, "painfully well." She continues:

C12.P57 It's so brutal how you can check (the numbers) out every day, people get destroyed by it . . . And you can't even forecast it. One hit doesn't mean that the next song would be a hit, it can fluctuate so much. The situation can change so rapidly and now you can see that in real time. It's just sick.

C12.P58 "Sometimes, in a bad moment," admitted Hank, "it makes you wonder why aren't these people clicking on the video or liking it?" Even Irish singer Olivia's "love" of statistics does not shield her from the intimately personal nature of performance metrics:

C12.P59 When I first started YouTube I definitely became obsessed, more in like a curious kind of geeky way, but also it's hard not to take it personally if some video you just put up just tanks and doesn't connect at all. I think that affects me more as a solo artist than it did with a band because it is just me, and it's under my real name. So it's very hard not take that personally.

C12.P60

It may be the case—as Olivia’s comment hints at—that solo artists performing under their own name are more vulnerable to metric-induced bouts of self-doubt. That being said, it is by no means rare for any video, single or album release to “tank.” Indeed, the recorded music industry is an industry in which over 90 percent of what is produced fails to cover its costs of production. In the music industry “failure is the norm” (Frith 2001: 33), and it has always been so. What is new is not only the transparency of failure (and success), but the way it positions performers.

C12.P61

Metrics turn musicians into an audience of themselves. As Goffman observed in a different context, “the performer comes to be his own audience; he comes to be performer and observer of the same show” (Goffman 1959: 86). Musicians are able to watch the drama of their own success and failure unfold in real time. In turn, metrics permit—even encourage—musicians to see themselves, and the performance of themselves, under a different light. As the authors of *Well-Being and Mental Health in the Gig Economy* put it, musicians “compare themselves to a version of themselves which they imagined they might be” (Gross et al. 2018: 17). “Martijn”—a DJ based in the Dutch city of Groningen—reflected on what Spotify told him about the location of his listeners:

C12.P62

Do you know there are only 84 people in Groningen who listen to my music, and 1200 in London? This for me is super weird. Like there should be a couple more here, maybe.

C12.P63

The more experienced musicians explained that that they have learned over time to not take feedback too personally. As Elsa put it: “Because you just can’t be, like, constantly sad and anxious. You can’t, do that every time.” Or, as Stefan reflected at length:

C12.P64

I do this YouTube thing now 6 years or something and whenever I got like very good views you're happy because something you made is doing fine, that's just a cool feeling. Also when I went viral, that's just amazing because you made something hoping people will like it and then 10 million people like it. That's insane. But there, it's always going like this and then you have when it goes down and when it goes up. Currently I'm in period where it's going a little bit like this again [*he indicates it going down*] but I'll keep doing my thing and it'll go up again. I've learned that over the span of 6 years. It used to be, not much fun. If the numbers are down you're like "hmm, why are they down?" But I try not to pay attention to that.

C12.P65

Like most of the musicians interviewed, Hank also expressed a desire to not pay too much attention to his metrics. "We are acknowledgment junkies," he admits. "It makes you very passive . . . that your belief in yourself as an artist just depends on the appreciation of people, and not just people, but clicks and likes, and numbers."

C12.P66

Ignoring metrics, however, is even harder than not reading one's reviews. Several musicians described how difficult it is to avoid looking at their online metrics and how seductive dashboards like YouTube Analytics or Spotify for Artists have become. "Nobody has the discipline not to look at their streams," laughed Elsa. In the following extended excerpt, Elsa describes her experience—and struggle—with tuning out "the noise":

C12.P67

At some point I just quit following [on Instagram] all the music media and almost all artists and record labels, everybody kind of . . . Well, I still follow a handful of artists but I have quit following almost all and started to follow some cats instead, and other animals . . . Because I just can't. At some point it made me so anxious to realize that fucking hell, the competition is so hard. Everywhere you run into some artists, all of them have their own thing and this one has this many followers and this was liked this much, and how do they do this? . . . And comparing yourself to others is an endless swamp, if you take that path. So that's why I've tried not to follow everyone all the time.

C12.S6

Autonomy from Metrics

C12.P68

Artists have always received feedback from fans and critics. “The very frame of ‘performance,’” writes Nancy [Baym \(2018: 145\)](#), “means that audiences have the right to evaluate how well you do.” For career musicians this has often meant making strategic decisions about what feedback to acknowledge and what to ignore, while balancing the romantic notion of “art for art’s sake” with the need to build a fanbase. The proliferation of performance metrics—and access to these metrics—has only amplified this struggle. Reflecting on her own experiences negotiating this balance, Finnish pop singer Elsa epitomizes the musician as “the reluctant entrepreneur” ([Haynes and Marshall 2018](#)):

C12.P69

I’ve been kind of deliberately trying not to think or inspect those numbers too much because it takes my focus out of the actual doing. After all I’m an artist and not a

business person, even though I make a product which is branded and marketed and all . . . But I want to keep the art and musicianship as a priority, so I think it's a good thing to protect myself from those things. Even though it can be quite difficult because you see so much data all the time without even wanting to. So, I don't want to dig into it any deeper than I already see.

C12.P70 There is often, however, no need to “dig deeper”: sometimes the message rings loud and clear. A popular Dutch DJ who composes both instrumental club tracks and tracks with vocals remarked, “You just see it in the amount of views or plays, that a vocal track gets more traction.” Mentioning that he was about to release a new vocal track later that same week, this musician said that he expected the song to perform better than a previous instrumental track. “We want to keep our output diverse, but we also want to make another hit,” he admitted.

C12.P71 Indeed, some interviewees confided that metrics could easily slip into being more than merely a reflection of performance: metrics could also become a driver of creative decisions. “Stefan” has released many music videos which have been very popular on YouTube. In our interview he discussed an audience retention metric for YouTubers, which allows creators to view an overall measure of how well a video retains its audience:

C12.P72 you can see when people click away and you can like see exactly where. So if I say, for example, “I don't like unicorns” and I see an 8% drop in views, then . . . I can think maybe in the next video I shouldn't mention unicorns, and then people will hopefully stick around to the end of the video or a later moment.

C12.P73 As we can see from this excerpt, Stefan finds these metrics not only informative, but also instructive of how he should adapt his music and the videos he uploads to YouTube.

C12.P74 Another interviewee—“Sander,” the manager and drummer of a band signed to Sony Music—described how metrics can invade the creative process of making music:

C12.P75 the starting point becomes how do we generate as much views; how are we going to release it in a way that the first wave of shares and likes is the biggest and stuff like that. So, it’s not really evil or something, but these are the first signs of social media reasoning in the creative process. And in the studio as well this happens, sometimes . . . finding a reference song and instantly checking out the amount of views or the demographics of the fan base or something like that.

C12.P76 What Sander calls “social media reasoning” is an example of what some scholars have referred to as “the metricated mindset”; whereby “the quantities presented by the metrics—and the anticipation of popularity expressed—privilege certain types of social action and guide behaviour” (Bolin and Andersson Schwarz 2015: 10).

C12.P77 Nevertheless, most of the musicians interviewed for this project categorically rejected any suggestion of this type of data-driven instrumentalism. Rosa, for example, described it as unnatural and unsuitable for her music:

C12.P78 If there’s a trick [to using data], I don’t feel like I want to learn what this trick is because it doesn’t feel natural . . . [M]y music is really based on emotions and feelings . . . maybe I’m a bit afraid when I know the trick, that my music is not

really natural, and I will get influenced by adjusting my music on what works, or something.

C12.P79 However, while most of those interviewed denied that data would change *their* approach to song-writing or production, they all agreed that *some* musicians would adapt their music. As Rosa put it: “I think the danger is that you change your music into what people want to hear, and I don’t want to do that. But I think a lot of people do that.”

C12.P80 In response to the question of what type of decisions *should* be informed by data, many of the musicians interviewed said that performance metrics were useful in helping them gather songs for an album, or to select singles for release. However, they mostly agreed that turning to such data while in the song-writing or production phase was counterproductive, or even harmful, to the creative process. Sander explained how the “hyper self-awareness” that results from the metricated mindset can be paralyzing for a creative artist:

C12.P81 If every word you write you create this feedback loop in your head where you think “what would my audience think?” you’re never going to write another word again. So probably the same danger exists for musicians if they stare at their screen all the time and at their social media accounts. They don’t have the time to write anymore or they’re too reflective inside of the creative process. And this is something you see a lot within the artists I know. They are very aware and very occupied with all these different questions and feedback loops that I guess were initiated by the feedback that social media gave them.

C12.P82 The following excerpts from two different interviews make a similar argument:

C12.P83 I think it's dangerous to be totally honest. I think it's really important for management and labels to have all the data and consider it . . . but I think artists themselves, like, almost shouldn't be able to access that kind of stuff. It just makes you overthink it, it makes me overthink it. (Olivia)

C12.P84 I don't believe that it has any real use for the artists . . . If you're an artist, it can actually be just a wrecking thing. But then again for a business, like a record label, I think for that side of things it makes work easier. (Elsa)

C12.P85 These interviewees have clearly reflected deeply on the artistic process. In laying out their arguments against "overthinking it" we can also see the familiar creativity/commerce split: "Commerce corrupts creativity and leads to compromise" (Negus and Pickering 2004: 46). This discourse positions creativity as being "perpetually and inevitably at odds with being controlled industrially" (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011: 85). In this version, performance metrics belong to the side of commerce, not to musicians. Some interviewees even portrayed the emphasis on metrics as a stalking horse for the tech industry. As "Martijn" remarked: "it's just part of software eating the world. Every industry is going to be disrupted by software whether you want it or not and that's happening to music as well."

C12.P86 However, while some musicians saw datafication as the long arm of "the suits" in charge of the music industry, others regarded their record labels as the buffer that protected them from their performance metrics. For instance, when asked if he looks at his metrics, a DJ signed to one of the largest electronic dance music labels in the world replied: "I can, but I don't really have to.

We have a really big management company behind us.” Others echoed this viewpoint. Signed to Universal Music (one of the “Big Three” record companies), Elsa commented on the freedom and protection this deal afforded her:

C12.P87

That’s why I like that I have the record label and all those people behind, who are analyzing that data better. I don’t think it should be the artist’s job anyway . . . Preferably indeed, try to protect yourself from it, so you wouldn’t be too influenced by other people’s reactions.

C12.P88

There is a touch of irony here: record companies—and particularly the major labels—have long been regarded as inhibitors, rather than enablers, of artistic autonomy and creative expression. According to this popular view, record companies are involved in the “industrialization of popular music”; a process whereby “something human is taken from us, and returned in the form of a commodity” (Frith 1987: 54). In certain genres of music and subcultures, signing a deal with a major label could be considered an act of “selling out” (Schilt 2004). According to the artists above, however, a record deal provides both protection and freedom. It is instead indie or DIY artists who are hostage to the potentially corrupting influence of metrics, while their record label compatriots are insulated and thus more free to focus on their art. In this interpretation, a record label—in providing protection from performance metrics—becomes an enabler of creativity. Commenting on her recently-signed record deal with Universal, Elsa talked about how she does not have to be directly concerned with her performance metrics anymore:

C12.P89 I find it so lovely that these things are now outsourced, I don't have to think about it that way anymore. I just trust that they have their systems and they do their best.

C12.P90 Thus, as with all choices, allowing oneself to be defined by one's metrics is a choice made under circumstances not entirely within one's choosing. Artists too can choose to ignore what the numbers say, but not every artist has the privilege to be able to do so.

C12.S7 **Conclusion: Musicians, Metrics, and the Performance**

Complex

C12.P91 It has always been true that “we derive our sense of self from the image of our self that others reflect back to us in interaction” (Crossley 2001: 143, summarizing Cooley 1902). Today, these interactions are just as likely to occur online as face-to-face, and the “others” we interact with are increasingly performance metrics reflecting back images of our self (see Couldry et al. 2016: 121). This chapter has explored the experience of performance metrics through the figure of the contemporary musician. As performers on-stage and online, musicians are constantly assessed and evaluated by industry actors, their peers, and music fans. The proliferation and availability of performance metrics has made both evaluation, and the sense of being evaluated, central to the experience of being a musician. How do powerful modes of quantification—made most visible through performance metrics—impact personal experiences and practices of artistic creation?

C12.P92 Musicians are keenly aware of the fact that metrics form part of their performance. They are introduced via their metrics. Metrics are often the first thing that greets a YouTube or Spotify user when they click on a music track or an artist profile. What is more, metrics permit the

comparison of performers and performances. They facilitate the reorganization of peer groups into categories organized around metrics. In turn, the performer increasingly sees herself and her performance *through* these metrics. It is through her metrics that the musician comes to know herself, and her peers, as performers.

C12.P93 In her earlier interviews with musicians about their uses of social media metrics, Nancy [Baym 2013](#) points out that many artists “may be ill equipped to access, move, manage, or interpret the data it takes to track and measure [their] audiences.” In my interviews, a feeling of frustration and even aversion to performance metrics came through. However, musicians also discussed how they make sense of various platforms and the types of metrics they provide.

C12.P94 Making sense does not imply that musicians will use these metrics in an “instrumental” fashion—to write, arrange, or produce songs that conform to what the numbers tell them. Certainly, some will, but musicians—like all artists—have always had to make decisions about the degree to which they incorporate or ignore audience feedback. However, there are now new actors generating new forms of (mediated) feedback that must also be taken into account. The range, immediacy, and sheer amount of feedback in the form of performance metrics can provoke a variety of emotions, as my interviewees attested to. Metrics reunite performers with their performance, and as with any reunion, both a sense of anticipation and anxiety are bound to be present.

C12.P95 As Hank, the Dutch singer-songwriter, remarked in his interview: “I’m like everyone else. Once I put something online that I think is important, I’m right there at the computer, keeping track of everything, and all the ‘likes’.” This comment points to the extremely personal nature of a musician’s “product.” At the same time, however, it touches on a broader, and apparently universal, need for recognition ([Honneth 1996](#)). Everyone who has ever posted anything on a

social media platform understands this. On these platforms we all have “audiences” that number in the hundreds, or even thousands (Litt 2012). In turn, interactions with these audiences—through “likes,” “follows,” “thumbs,” and other metrics—increasingly assume a quantified form. Feedback and other modes of recognition that were once mainly qualitative are now increasingly quantitative. “This quantification of the qualitative,” Helen Kennedy (2016: 150) warns, “should concern us because of what is lost when numbers are assigned such power, when numbers become cultural objects, and take on a new force.”

C12.P96

Whether we are artists or academics, our lives are increasingly entangled within performance metrics and other numbers. Thus, while musicians may be “cultural forerunners” (Baym 2018: 7), the tensions they experience and the strategies they develop have implications for all of us living within the “performance complex.”

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