

# Library music as a matter of time

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Time & Society  
2024, Vol. 33(2) 212–233  
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DOI: 10.1177/0961463X241229183

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## Abstract

The industry of library music (pre-existing pieces that can be licensed for use in media) has grown considerably in the past two decades with its transition to a digital medium. A rising number of composers rely on this music as a source of income, along with audiovisual creators who increasingly use it in their productions. This expansion has accentuated a fundamental aspect of library music: the creation of large quantities of tracks at breakneck speed. Parallel to this, the video editors and videographers who form library music's main client base experience tight production deadlines where the choice of music is often left as an afterthought. This article explores the implications of the sped-up creation and use of library music in the current online media landscape. Although the interactions of composers and videographers with this music are often fraught with concerns of limited time, their attitudes towards this acceleration vary considerably: for instance, composers describe their fast-paced work in widely different ways, viewing it as a constraint, or, on the contrary, as a positive and freeing aspect. That being said, the sense of urgency shared by these agents has wide-ranging impacts on every step of the 'life' of a library track, from its composition and presentation to its selection and synchronisation with images. As composers attempt to appeal to hurried videographers browsing libraries, these, in turn, resort to this music as an invaluable strategy to retain their audience's attention. Furthermore, sonic stereotypes that are prevalent in library music are valued as communication shortcuts in audiovisuals where messages must be conveyed through instantly recognisable musical formulas. In addition

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to broader impacts on the workings of library music, this widespread perception of 'lacking time' is also a vital factor that shapes its sonic characteristics themselves, making library music truly a matter of time.

### **Keywords**

library music, stock music, audiovisuals, online media, music sociology, videography, composers, musical stereotypes

'Kurt',<sup>1</sup> the founder of a library music catalogue, discusses in an interview the importance that his clients (video editors, videographers and other audiovisual creators) place on speed when browsing music for their projects. Claiming that most search for library music in a hurry, 'Kurt' states: 'I think speed is really important. People tend, in my experience, to come to a music library right at the moment they need the track. They'll be in the edit, and they'll be like, 'we need something for this, and we want it now' (...) people don't really want to wait'. Time, therefore, seems to be of the essence in library music. But how exactly, for whom, and in what ways? How does this perception of scarce time affect and inform interactions with this music, from its composers to the audiovisual creators who use it? How is this temporal constraint experienced by these agents? What are its implications in every step of the 'life' of a library track, from its sonic profile itself to its categorisation and synchronisation with images? And how have such impacts changed with the advent of digital tools and online platforms?

Rather than formulating aesthetic value judgements on the music that results from this accelerated production, this article tackles these questions with a descriptive-analytical perspective that seeks a more nuanced understanding of how time compression shapes the creation and use of library music. While the shared sense of limited time in this music industry is undoubtedly a constraint, it does not automatically follow that it is homogeneously perceived as a negative aspect. Such time pressures will thus not be approached here as a self-explanatory insufficiency that necessarily results in mediocre work and substandard music. In other words, rather than departing from a uniformly despondent outlook on time constraints and denouncing them as an indubitably negative facet of library music, the article instead inquires into how differently (and even positively) they can be experienced by various agents, and how they shape this musical practice.

Library music (also known as stock or production music) refers to pre-existing pieces composed for future use in all kinds of audiovisual content, from reality television and advertising to trailers and online videos (Deaville, 2006; Durand, 2020; Huelin, 2022). Today, it is mostly accessed online, in websites

where library tracks are categorised by mood, emotion, instrumentation and genre, among other possibilities. Though it is ubiquitous in the current media landscape, library music as an industry and artistic practice remains mostly hidden from the public eye. Since the beginnings of recorded music libraries in the 1930s,<sup>2</sup> it has become increasingly significant both for musicians seeking an income and for audiovisual creators who lack the necessary budget (or time) to commission bespoke music for their projects. Even though library composers and users are guided by widely varying practices and purposes, they nevertheless share a common concern: a perceived acceleration of their work and of limited time, prompting constant efforts to ‘save’<sup>3</sup> as much of it as possible. Both composers and audiovisual creators address this sense of urgency by adopting specific strategies that influence every stage in a library music track, from its composition to its labelling with keywords in a catalogue, its selection by clients, and, ultimately, its synchronisation with moving images.

This article demonstrates how that shared perception of scarce time affects a surprising number of factors in the creation and use of library music. These range from practical considerations to, more unexpectedly, the musical characteristics of a library track, hinting that these cannot simply be understood as artistic choices by composers, but rather as the result of strategies that reveal how keenly aware they are of their (and others’) ‘lack of time’. In addition, the article explores how library music’s reputation as a quick solution for time-strapped video editors, which has always been a vital part of its appeal, has gained in importance with the transition of this musical practice to digital formats and online platforms. These new technologies reinforce library music’s purpose as a ‘ready-to-use’ material that can be quickly and easily cut up and transformed by users, which in itself has profound implications for this music’s sonic profile. The article thus seeks to situate the production and consumption of library music in the wider context of cultural industries where recent technological developments have heightened temporal pressures over creators and consumers alike, redefining labour practices as well as cultural objects themselves.

To examine these questions, I will draw data from interviews conducted with thirteen library music composers and producers, along with fifteen videographers and video editors, between 2019 and 2021. Interviewees were based in the UK, US, France and Portugal, and were aged between 23 and 50 years old. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured script and took place in person or over video-calls. I will also draw from an analysis of online resources (articles, vlogs, handbooks and forums) that address composers or users of library music.

Scholarly literature that broaches the concept of ‘time’ in music has focused, among other questions, on the perception of the passage of time in a music piece (*cf.* Kramer, 1988), or on time as a philosophical component of artistic creation (Richardson and Gorbman, 2013: 25). However, a discussion of the effects of an

accelerated musical production has been relatively lacking in musicological discourse, and this phenomenon remains completely unexplored in the specific case of library music. This musical practice illustrates with particular clarity what Wajcman (2015) identifies as a widespread awareness of a growing acceleration, indissociable from the commodification of time under industrial capitalism. The cultural values that inform the production and consumption of goods in contemporary industrial societies are based on ideals of constant renovation and productivity: time itself is therefore understood as a scarce commodity to be carefully managed and rationed (*cf.* Fuchs, 2013).

The same reasoning is found in various contexts of cultural production and in the organisation of art worlds. While speed has always been a central factor in library music, the recent intensification of this aspect can only be understood in light of wider developments in mass media and digital technologies. These changes, of course, cannot be simply reduced to a homogeneous (and homogeneously felt) acceleration. As Stine and Volmar (2021: 9) argue, this apparently ubiquitous 'technological and cultural acceleration' conceals in truth complex relations within (and between) technologies. Likewise, Lohmeier et al. (2020: 1522) stress that, while 'speedup seems to be the preferred sort of temporal existence associated with digital data', our interactions with such digital systems are not solely defined by a 'speedup', as it coexists with different temporal modes. That being said, academic research on the crucial changes experienced by musicians with the expansion of digital tools and online platforms points to a widespread perception of acceleration, from performance and music production to composition for media (Born, 2009: 742).

Digital technologies have had profound impacts not only in the habits and practices that inform how music is created and accessed, but also in the ways musicians conceptualise their professional identity and balance various activities, tackling a wider array of tasks that previously would have fallen to different professionals (Théberge, 2015). In bespoke scoring for cinema, for example, Audissino (2017: 224) notes how film composers must today be proficient with digital tools, a factor which has 'enormously quickened the [composition] process', adding that 'producers and executives have taken notice, shortening the minimum time they grant composers to deliver the music'. In the case of library music, too, our interactions with digital technologies and processes have produced 'new experiences of time' (Barker, 2012: 9).

## **Video editors in a hurry: Strategies and marketing of libraries**

Library music is most frequently described as a cheaper alternative to other musical options for audiovisuals. However, its often-publicised advantage of 'saving time' is no less important. Acquiring a license for the non-exclusive

use of a library track is, generally speaking, not only cheaper but also much faster than commissioning bespoke music or clearing the rights to use a well-known commercial song. This latter option typically involves an intricate tangle of copyrights that can take months to unpick, whereas the synchronisation rights of a library track can today be obtained in a matter of minutes. As for the commissioning of bespoke music, it is naturally a lengthier process that involves the composition and recording of new pieces. The fact that library music is a ready-to-use option therefore makes it especially appealing in post-production processes where music is often a last-minute decision.

For this reason, it is touted as a useful asset in ‘imminent production deadlines’ (Alten, 2013: 360) and for audiovisual creators who consider time to be ‘their most important commodity’ (Graham, 2017). However, library music – due in part to a persistent and overly reductive reputation of being clichéd and uninteresting (Durand, 2020) – is often a reluctant second-choice for audiovisual creators, who resort to it only because they are pressed for time. We find an example of this in a guide for music supervisors which claims that, even though library music can be ‘generic’ and ‘boring’, ‘in a time crunch, [it] can be your best friend’ (Adams et al., 2017: 114).

The synchronisation of music to pictures is widely fraught with a sense of urgency, be it in the context of high-budget, feature-length films (Hoover, 2010), television programmes (Tan et al., 2021), or freelance videography, where the saying ‘time is money’ is just as prevalent (Joseph, 2017). This perceived ‘lack of time’ for music-related decisions is particularly noteworthy among videographers who create content for online platforms such as YouTube, often with precipitous production schedules. Professional youtubers regularly release new videos in order to stay relevant in the eyes of viewers and, no less crucially, of algorithms, which grant increased visibility to those who publish more frequently. These new ‘temporal regimes aimed for by algorithmic media’ (Lohmeier et al., 2020: 1525) have also contributed to further strengthen the importance of fast-paced productivity in library music with the advent of digital and online technologies.

The rush in which many creators of online videos find themselves in their search for music isn’t solely due to a busy schedule, but also to the attention and time they allocate to this specific task, which more often than not is relegated to an afterthought in post-production. Some of the videographers interviewed for this research claimed that they initially planned to compose original music for their projects, but ended up turning to libraries because they had ‘run out of time’, having preferred to ‘invest it’ in other aspects. It’s the case of ‘Carlos’, ‘Marcelo’ and ‘Antonio’, three Portuguese freelance videographers, with the latter remarking, ‘the advantages of using ready-made music are a combination of convenience, variety and laziness. Laziness because at first I often plan to make the music myself, but then I always leave it for the last minute’.

As for ‘Marcelo’, his comments make abundantly clear his aversion to using library music (a decision he attributes solely to his time-pressed schedules) when he unfavourably compares it to ‘MacDonald’s fast food’, as opposed to bespoke music, which he likens instead to ‘a gourmet burger’ (stating about the former, ‘we all know it’s no good, but we all eat it’). While some of the interviewed videographers asserted that they dedicate as much time to the choice of music as to other elements, most, such as ‘Barbara’, a British youtuber, claimed that they leave the music for last, commenting: ‘Usually by the time I’m doing the music I’m kind of in a hurry to finish the entire video’.

A significant reason for this is that many of the interviewees did not consider the search and selection of music to be part of their creative process, seeing it rather as a chore to labour through. The same perspective is echoed by video editors and videographers in online forums, with members voicing their frustration with the time spent browsing and selecting library music. Among other examples, in the subreddits r/Video Editing and r/Editors, in posts dating from 2018, we find comments such as ‘finding the right [stock] songs takes up a TON of my time’ (u/Guy1der, 2018) and ‘Music searches are a time suck’ (u/eezagood, 2018). In these discourses, we are faced with the rather contradictory claims that music is both an essential ingredient for videos, and something which videographers ought not to ‘waste’ time with. This can be partly understood if we take into account the widespread notion (both among videographers and library music professionals) that music falls beyond the realm of expertise of these audiovisual creators, who are often presented as lacking the necessary skills to communicate about music.

Libraries are thus advertised as intermediaries between videographers and the music they seek, with music-tagging systems that are specifically conceived to be quick to use by clients who might lack a more technical musical vocabulary. We find a growing awareness among library professionals that ‘getting the music a client needs fast is getting more and more important’ (Graham, 2018b). In an interview, ‘Kurt’ also stresses the importance of offering music licenses that are easy to understand, mentioning his clients’ difficulty in grasping the complexities of licensing tracks for video. The simplicity and ease (and, by implication, speed) of the licensing process thus become a significant factor in a client’s decision to opt for certain libraries over others. The competition between libraries is therefore increasingly waged on the simplification of their legal licenses. This explains the frequency with which libraries highlight how swiftly their tracks can be licensed, often drawing an explicit link between saving ‘time’ and ‘money’: ‘Save time & money. Gain access to all our music right away’ (HookSounds, 2019).

There is another aspect that plays into libraries’ efforts to win over clients: the amount of music in their catalogue. Libraries advertise the wide variety of musical genres and styles they offer, priding themselves in stocking a little of everything, as well as keeping up to date with the latest musical trends. This is

yet another facet in which speed proves crucial in this music industry, with library professionals striving to react as quickly as possible to evolving musical demands (or even to predict them). However, the vast quantities of tracks in libraries can also be considered problematic by clients, who dread the time spent sifting through thousands of options. Ironically, these two factors that are deemed essential for the success of a library – the promise of a diverse range of music and quick solutions for clients – can thus become incompatible.

In this respect, to ensure their clients' search for music is as fast as possible, a clear and effective categorisation and tagging of tracks is a fundamental strategy for libraries. Tracks are given titles, descriptions and keywords, and are sorted into categories or themed playlists to ensure clients quickly find the music they are looking for. For example, 'Paula', a Portuguese freelance videographer, explains in an interview that, given she often has no longer than an afternoon to fully edit a video, these categories and keywords are an invaluable shortcut when she browses a library. These categories thus become a vital factor in clients' preferences for certain libraries, as they can significantly expedite their search for music. While these paratexts can refer to musical genres, tempo or instrumentation, they are also heavily based on extra-musical concepts such as moods, narrative actions, audiovisual genres, or time periods (a category which in itself warrants yet another angle of exploration of the concept of 'time' in library music, though it would fall beyond the scope of this article). These labels effectively reinforce the conventional functions of music in narrative audiovisual media, such as suggesting emotional states or indicating geographic locations (Tagg, 2012: 77).

In addition to these paratexts, the offer of up-to-date themed playlists in libraries<sup>4</sup> is also valued as a way to 'save clients' time' by presenting pre-selected tracks. Alluding to this practice, a 2019 advertisement for library MegaTrax states 'We know you're busy, so we'll find and recommend the best of our new content to you' (Megatrax, 2019). In some platforms, clients can create their own playlists or save tracks in order to better manage their time in their search for music. 'Bertha', a professional wedding videographer, explains in an interview: 'I spend a day searching for good songs on Artlist, download them to a folder, and then save them for later. (...) It's definitely a question of time, of saving time'. 'Bernard', a French youtuber, also states, 'I save the tracks that I think are usable in a folder in my laptop, that way I always have some music for my videos that I can get quickly'.

Beyond categories and keywords, there are other aspects in the presentation of library websites that are deliberately designed to suit hasty video editors and videographers. Displaying the waveform of tracks is increasingly popular, as it allows clients browsing libraries to instantly get a visual sense of a track's progression without having to listen to it (by, for example, seeing any breaks or build-ups in the waveform). 'Kurt' explains how he started to include waveforms

in his library once he realised they could further speed up the browsing process of clients: ‘they’ll flip through the waveform (...) they’ll skip along certain points – what happens when it gets bigger? Or there’s a dip, let’s have a listen to that – and they’ll dive into certain points. So they consume their music visually as well’.

This is another example of how digital tools have increased the speed with which library music is accessed and selected. While these processes were always fraught with some sense of urgency, the specific affordances of these technologies have enabled even more precipitous interactions with library tracks. The material realities of searching and listening to library music for most of the twentieth century (with physical catalogues and CD recordings) have now been overwhelmingly replaced by online platforms with features that allow for far more agility during a music search. ‘Victor’, a French video-game composer who has worked in library music since the 1990s, recalls in an interview how, even then, he was aware that ‘editors only listened to the first ten seconds’ of his tracks; however, he goes on to stress that he feels this has accelerated further, becoming an even greater challenge to ‘catch the attention’ of editors and other clients.

### **Composers in a hurry: Composing for time-strapped video editors**

Having outlined how the importance of providing a quick and easy experience for clients fundamentally informs the presentation of music in a library, I now turn to the ways in which this ever-present imperative of speed shapes the composition of tracks themselves. Composers, too, are keenly aware that their clients set little time aside to search for music. Several of the interviewed composers remarked that clients listened to only a few seconds of each track, a claim which was corroborated by videographers such as ‘Barbara’: ‘I can usually tell pretty quickly if the music I’m listening to is right for my video, and so I’ll listen to the first few seconds of a bunch of tracks in order to choose’. Composers are therefore mindful that clients, due to tight deadlines and a vast musical offer, will likely browse catalogues at a high speed, previewing only a handful of tracks, and for no longer than a few seconds. As will be examined ahead, this becomes a decisive factor in the composition and sonic characteristics of library tracks.

The typical listening experience of audiovisual creators searching for library music, hopping from track to track, poses significant challenges to composers, in particular, that of catching their attention as swiftly as possible – or, in other words, causing a good first impression. This results in a set of rules or ‘best practices’ which are routinely recommended to composers, such as avoiding slow developments and introductions in order to quickly present the main musical theme of a track. For example, in Barden’s (2017: 67) handbook, we read:

'it's fair to say [clients] will preview, at most, 5 s of your music. (...) if you need to have an intro keep it as short as possible. (...) If they can't get to the meat of the composition quickly they'll give up too soon'. It is especially striking to note how recurring this warning is in online materials aimed at library composers. We encounter it again in a blog post in the platform Envato, which owns the royalty-free library Audio Jungle: 'With such heavy competition nowadays, it's of the utmost importance that you make a good first impression, and quickly. Buyers often won't listen for more than 20–30 s. In most cases, avoid long build-ups and slow starts' (AurusAudio, 2016).

Furthermore, composers are warned that clients might have a fragmented listening experience when they sample a track, jumping from one section to the next. Composers are therefore advised to 'skip test' their music: In other words, to emulate the potentially disjointed way in which their track will be listened to by prospective clients, to determine whether or not it will hold their attention throughout. In his handbook, Graham (2018a: 18–19) stresses the importance of the first and last seconds of a track, arguing that clients might sample the start and then skip straight to the end, 'playing a few seconds here and there'.

While these examples reveal varying degrees of pessimism regarding the amount of time clients will set aside to listen to a track (from thirty seconds to only five), all insist on the same advice regarding a track's structure and musical development. These recommendations reinforce the relatively homogenous sound of library tracks, which tend to focus on one main musical idea, avoiding any pronounced changes in instrumentation, melody or harmonic progression. Such characteristics are usually (and rightly) linked to library music's central purpose of being synchronised to moving images, given it must be simple enough to not draw attention to itself or impede an understanding of spoken voices. However, as we can glean from this advice given to composers, that is not the sole motive behind such sonic traits: they are also indissociable from constant and calculated efforts to quickly catch the attention of clients.

In addition to this, library professionals are aware of videographers' and video editors' preferences for tracks that are easy (and not time-consuming) to edit and modify during their synchronisation with pictures. Clients tend to prefer library tracks with minimal variation, rather than with significant changes and progression: if a track remains relatively homogenous, it will allow for a more seamless reassembling of its different sections, making it quicker to shorten, lengthen, or otherwise modify in order to synchronise it with video. Libraries thus increasingly advertise their music as being specially tailored to be 'easy to edit'. For instance, an advertisement of the library Killer Tracks states: 'When people are working on tight deadlines they need music that is editable and consistently mastered. We provide that' (Hall, 2017). This reasoning also drives libraries to provide shorter versions of tracks (such as 10 or 30 second versions), in order to save clients the time of creating those shorter versions themselves.

Such temporal considerations therefore shape the very structure and sonic profile of library tracks. In order to accommodate their clients' pressed schedules, composers craft tracks that quickly introduce the main musical ideas and, no less crucially, that have no significant changes throughout their duration, so as to facilitate a track's future transformation by its users. In this sense, I argue that library music's stability (with the use of well-established formulas and a minimum of variations) is, in fact, a necessary trait to ensure it is ready to use in a wide variety of unforeseen contexts. In other words, and perhaps a little counter-intuitively, this music's sonic predictability is necessary to allow for the unpredictability of its future uses.

On this subject, we can situate library music in the broader transformations brought by digital technologies that have profoundly shaped cultural and artistic production, by enabling certain processes to stretch over time with ongoing (and unpredictable) changes. Referring specifically to the digital image, Barker (2012: 5) notes how it 'can be thought of as a relatively unstable object, as it is only produced through an ongoing technological process (...) It does not exist as a thing made, but as a thing that is continually *in the making*'. This reasoning applies particularly well to library tracks, which are conceived not as music pieces with closed endings fixed in time, but rather as open material meant to be continuously transformed (Durand, 2023). In bespoke scoring for cinema, too, composers increasingly work with short post-production deadlines and film cuts that are constantly being edited, prompting them to favour musical approaches that can be swiftly adapted to last-minute changes. In library music, however, composers ultimately do not know where and how their music might be used: a track must therefore allow for its own swift transformation at the hands of agents other than its creators.

## **Viewers in a hurry: Musical stereotypes as communication shortcuts**

As will be outlined in the following section, the recurring use of formulas and stereotypes in library music can partly be attributed to the sense of urgency felt by composers. However, it is also crucially linked to this music's usefulness in instantly communicating extra-musical meanings. A comment by Doug Wood, founder of library OmniMusic, calls attention to this, when Wood advises composers once again to avoid long and slow introductions, so as to quickly establish the mood and genre of a track:

A perfect piece captures a universal feeling that [time-strapped media producers] will really latch onto (...) but it captures that feeling perfectly and does it very quickly. With production music especially, we don't have the luxury of a 16-bar intro because we have to orient that audience to where the director wants them to be and then get out of the way, so setting that mood is critical. (Wood in Adams et al., 2017: 172)

Special importance is given here to the potential of library music to swiftly convey a director's or video editor's intended message or emotion (or, in other words, to 'set the right tone in a heartbeat' [Graham, 2018a: 100]). Stereotypes are also a valued 'tool of the trade' in library music due to their convenience during a speedy and prolific composition. Naturally, the prevalence of stereotypes is in no way exclusive to library music. Faulkner (1983) and, more recently, Audissino (2017: 224), in their discussions of creative and labour practices in mainstream cinema, point to a connection between 'formulaic' and stereotyped approaches to composition and the need to meet ever-shortening deadlines.

Library music, however, also has to be clearly labelled in a vast catalogue, with extra-musical connotations that, ideally, will be immediately recognised by clients – a principle which in itself encourages the use of stereotypes. Tagg's (2012) work on music semiotics has extensively explored the role that stereotypes play in television and in library catalogues, pointing to some of the most frequent associations between specific musical characteristics and concepts related to mood or emotions, among others. As Tagg (2012: 308) notes, musical parameters such as timbre can be deeply effective to communicate certain meanings, an effect which is largely (albeit not exclusively) 'contingent on culturally specific conventions of stylisation'. Interestingly, Tagg suggests a connection between the use of stereotypes in libraries and the importance of having clients promptly find the music they're looking for, by ensuring that tracks correspond as clearly as possible to their categories and keywords.

We can therefore argue that stereotypes in library music are valued for their potential as communication shortcuts in media, by quickly transmitting certain meanings to an audience that shares a set of cultural references. Among other authors, Buhler (2014) highlights how the unambiguous storytelling and communication of mainstream cinema fundamentally relies on musical stereotypes. Instantly recognisable musical formulas are also invaluable in shorter audiovisual formats such as advertisement (Fraile, 2016: 39). According to Van Elferen (2012: 77), the 'repetitive, sometimes formulaic sound' of 'generic pre-existing music' in television (a definition which heavily implies library music) is useful to include as much information as possible in short audiovisual sequences, thus promoting the use of '[music] whose connotations are meant to be instantly recognized'.

The logics and motivations behind the use of library music (and its stereotypes) are also intrinsically tied with the rapid and fragmented consumption of audiovisuals – particularly in what concerns online media, where a growing profusion of content competes for attention. The issues raised by a scarcity of attention in online viewing habits have been widely discussed: for instance, in the case of advertisement, digital and online mediums have brought both new possibilities and constraints, with Taylor (2014: 275) noting, 'the new abundance of information is met with a scarcity of the attention needed to consume it'. Hesmondhalgh (2019: 449) also identifies a growing acceleration in cultural consumption, with a

preference for shorter formats and a ‘tendency to skip from text to text’. This has inevitable ramifications for the ways in which such cultural products are conceived, with, as we have seen in the case of library music, the reliance on certain sonic traits to capture and retain consumers’ attention.

This is equally true of media producers who rely on the income generated by advertisement, as is the case of youtubers and other videographers who publish their videos online, and for whom library music is a vital strategy to keep viewers engaged. In other words, if library composers feel considerable pressure to attract videographers browsing libraries in a rush, the same difficulty is keenly felt by videographers themselves, who are only too aware of the need to keep the attention of viewers who jump from video to video. Not only do they compete in a saturated online medium, the algorithm of the platforms where they upload their content, such as YouTube, emerges once again as a decisive factor in the temporal pressures they experience: among other aspects, the algorithm takes into account the amount of time that viewers spend on a video, which will then influence which videos are recommended (De Marchi, 2018). Youtubers are thus encouraged to use the platform’s analytic tools to closely monitor the time spent by viewers on videos (so-called ‘audience retention’).

Curiously, then, the advice given to aspiring youtubers closely mirrors that given to library composers, such as ‘it’s good to keep any intros short to keep it from getting dull’, or ‘10 s is the average amount of time it takes for a YouTube viewer, after clicking a video, to decide whether or not they want to watch the rest’ (McGavin, 2017). The use of library music is not only recommended as a way of keeping viewers’ attention, but even of making a video feel shorter than it is, as summed up in numerous vlogs and articles advising beginner youtubers: ‘You only have one shot to grab your audience’s attention with your video before their limited attention span times out. Music can help you keep your audience glued to their screen’ (SoundStripe, 2018); and ‘A really good fast paced energetic song can pick up the pace so it kinda tricks the viewer into thinking that the video is a lot shorter than it actually is’ (Video Creators, 2017).

In addition to this, shorter audiovisual formats have increasingly gained importance, with the rising popularity of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (where, until recently, video duration was limited to three minutes). The growing number of videos made for these platforms – and, consequently, of video creators seeking music – has compelled libraries to offer shorter tracks specifically to be used in this content. Indeed, several library professionals explicitly mention these new formats and their time constraints as the main reason for investing in very brief music tracks. Among other examples, an article in online broadcast magazine *Newscast Studio* illustrates this perspective: ‘With the increase in social media licenses, requests are growing for shorter cuts and edit points, sometimes even as short as 7 or 8 s’ (*Newscast Studio*, 2017).

These shorter online formats also have other, more unexpected implications for library music. In an interview, wedding videographer ‘Bertha’ explains

that, in order to upload her wedding montage videos to social media platforms such as Instagram, her clients must cut them down to the allowed duration: to this end, 'Bertha' claims that the credits are invariably the first to be cut, thus erasing any information on the library and composer of the music used (which 'Bertha' always includes in the credits, though she is not obliged to do so).

### **Composers in a hurry (again): Labour strategies and practices**

As was demonstrated in the previous sections, in a fast-paced media production marked by tight deadlines, regular uploads, and insufficient time allocated to music during post-production, library composers conceive their tracks according to certain parameters so as to improve their chances with time-strapped clients: for instance, by avoiding introductions or slow developments, using well-established formulas, and favouring musical structures that will facilitate a track's future editing and cutting-up. It is therefore vital to take into account that these musical facets of library tracks cannot simply be understood as aesthetic choices of composers: they are first and foremost the result of strategies that seek to 'save' clients' time.

But the 'lack of time' experienced by videographers and video editors (and their audiences) is not the only temporal factor that has a tangible impact on library music's sonic characteristics: composers, too, display an acute awareness of their own scarce time. Their efforts to carefully manage and 'save' time have noticeable and wide-ranging effects that go beyond the creation of a track itself, and that influence various practical aspects in their professional activity, beginning with a set of strategies to compose great quantities of music at a fast pace. The recurring expression 'it's a numbers game' in library composer forums encapsulates the need to publish a great number of tracks in order to generate higher royalty payments.

For this reason, the use of effective formulas and stereotypes in library music isn't solely due to the importance of quickly communicating extra-musical connotations: it's also tightly linked with composers' strategies to produce abundantly and at high speeds. For this reason, some composers describe their activity in ways that evoke industrialised and rationalised processes: for instance, by referring to 'tried-and-tested' formulas that improve a track's chances of success, thus ensuring they can maintain an 'efficient workflow' and that they did not 'waste their time' by composing something unlikely to be licensed (Berklee Online, 2016).

Beyond the reliance on stereotypes, the importance of composing as fast and efficiently as possible can have other implications for a track's sonic profile. For example, composer Daniel Carrizalez advises his peers in a vlog to focus on creating 'simple music', and to keep the same instrumentation during a track so as to

not waste time looking for different samples as they compose: ‘Don’t spend endless hours looking for different instruments and trying to make it better. Because otherwise (...) you will never have the time to make new music’ (Stock Music Licensing, 2017). ‘Victor’’s comments in an interview complemented this perspective, when the composer claimed that he lacked the necessary time to constantly keep up with the latest composition softwares and samples, and that, for this reason, his library tracks tended to resort to the same set of sounds.

In this respect, although the creative possibilities afforded by technologies such as digital samples have been thoroughly discussed, the experience of library composers such as ‘Victor’ hint at the ambivalent relationship that these musicians may have with such tools, valuing their potential yet feeling unable to stay up to date with constant new releases of sample packages. While the economic factor behind this is a frequent conversation topic among library composers (with good quality samples commanding high prices), we must also take into account the time-related challenges that may lead composers to limit themselves to the same virtual instruments and sounds – revealing how, in library music, too, temporal shifts brought by digital technologies may ‘exert pressures of conformity and standardization’ over different experiences and processes (Stine and Volmar, 2021: 11).

That being said, while many composers adapt to the fast pace of library music production by following these strategies, it is worth contradicting overly simplistic (and still widespread) assumptions that describe the experience of these musicians as overwhelmingly frustrated and lacking in creativity (Lanza, 2004: 64). On the contrary, some of the interviewed composers, such as ‘Simon’, claimed that they experienced the high speed at which they composed as a stimulating challenge and a creative catalyst, promoting a feeling of spontaneity and preventing them from ‘overthinking’ certain decisions. ‘Simon’ described such time constraints as ‘freeing’, by compelling him to move from one track to the next, rather than dwelling on any imperfections which he asserts would otherwise ‘block him’ – which points us to another often-heard mantra in library music circles: ‘write, submit, forget, repeat’.

Nevertheless, discussions and value judgements around library music today still draw heavily from preconceptions that cast it as mediocre and artistically inferior, which is often blamed on industrial precepts of fast-paced, formulaic production. However, it is curious to note that, when it comes to contemporary narratives focused on past eras of library music, especially the 1970s, the practice of abundant and high-speed composition tends instead to be presented as a sign of composers’ talent. Library music from this period has recently undergone a process of legitimization, with its composers increasingly being canonised through romantic ideals of intrinsic inspiration and ‘genius’. In recent texts that qualify the 1970s as a ‘golden age’ of library music, the ‘need for speed in production’ is lauded as something that ‘contributed to the ethos of spontaneous creativity’ (Hollander, 2018: 18), rather than being criticised for encouraging composers to use ‘tried-and-tested’ formulas.

One incident in particular, touching on composer Keith Mansfield's last-minute writing of a 1970s library theme that would become a cult classic, is a particularly telling example. Mansfield's breakneck speed when composing is often presented as a sign of his creativity, with Mansfield himself commenting: 'The thing about that is you don't second guess yourself – whatever ideas come to mind' (Mansfield in Lomax, 2018: 242–243).<sup>5</sup> This positive depiction of the challenges of rapid composition contrasts with the far more negative view of time constraints in library music today, which are blamed instead for formulaic and standardised approaches, thus revealing how the same notion of 'lack of time' experienced by composers can support widely different narratives.

However, while it may prompt certain negative value judgements of library music, the capacity to compose great quantities of music at a rapid pace can also be a matter of pride among composers today, who often cast it as the mark of a skilled and efficient professional. The value placed on the ability to adapt to temporal pressures is of course not exclusive to library music, and we find parallels with various other contexts of cultural production. In the context of stock photography, for example (an industry that bears many logistical similarities to that of library music), 'speed' is a pervasive and highly valued concept, whether it refers to an image's potential to 'very quickly convey a message' (Frosh, 2003: 207), or to a photographer's capacity to meet deadlines.

Similarly, if we turn our attention to bespoke scoring for cinema (a field that is distinctly more prestigious than library music), composer accounts closely echo the comments of library composers quoted earlier. To give but a few examples, in Hoover's interviews with film composers, we find testimonies such as 'The luxury of time is almost never afforded to composers these days' (Broxton in Hoover, 2010); or the claim that successful film composers are those who are 'quick and adaptable', and who can 'come up with new ways of making the process more efficient, while still keeping the quality of music at the maximum' (Hunter in Hoover, 2009: 215), a remark which suggests an industrial-like search for productivity.

Beyond the production of fictional media, Schlesinger's (1987) account of journalistic practices in the BBC highlights the 'stopwatch culture' of deadlines that fundamentally informs professional habits and criteria in this context, with speed valued highly over other aptitudes. While these are just some examples of cultural industries where temporal considerations are ever-present and decisive, they may give us a more complete understanding of the ways in which library composers conceive of their musical activity according to time constraints, how this factor informs their management of different tasks, and how it affects their identity as 'creative artists' or 'skilled professionals'.

Similarly to these contexts of cultural production, the ways in which library composers discuss their activity frequently reveal ideals of self-discipline and meticulous time management. The widely-shared notion that they ought to

have a predetermined routine to be as efficient as possible leads some composers, like 'Bradley', to describe their full-time work in library music in dispassionate terms, calling it a 'daily grind'. Library composers can thus be guided both by an imperative of speed and by a stable and fixed routine, where their available time is allocated to different tasks that are repeated regularly (as illustrated by the aforementioned motto of 'write submit, forget, repeat').

This monitoring and managing of time isn't solely practiced by composers who create library music as their full-time occupation: it is also a keen concern of those who compose in their 'free time', after their main employment (which might or might not be music-related). To give but one example, when, in his online library music course, British composer Michael Kruk mentions the 'lack of time' experienced by composers who combine library music with other paid work, Kruk promises to teach them techniques that will help them become 'efficient writing machines' in their available time (Music For Income, 2020). Ironically, then, for composers who have other paid occupations but who invest some of their remaining time in library music, this 'free time' is often strictly controlled and managed. This is especially evident in online forums where composers frequently highlight the importance of being efficient in their limited time available after a 'day job', discussing how to plan (and stick to) working schedules during this 'free' time. In this sense, even before composers enter into contractual agreements with libraries, their activity can take on the rigidity of capitalist labour logics (Gill and Pratt, 2008).

Library composers are of course far from being the only cultural workers who attempt to balance different tasks and sources of income. In her account of what she terms 'speeded up creative worlds', McRobbie (2002) notes how a widespread acceleration of cultural production across different arts and fields has resulted in artists increasingly engaging in various tasks that tend to be thought of as 'non-creative', but which nevertheless come to be perceived as 'integral and actively incorporated into the artistic identity' (*idem*: 520). In a more specific musical context, Hracs (2016: 42) outlines how a growing digitalisation has brought new opportunities for working musicians while also exerting greater temporal pressures in their day to day, with many struggling to 'allocate their time and energy to creative and non-creative tasks' (*idem*: 47). The same applies to library music, with composers tackling a wide array of activities that go beyond music creation itself.

This is by no means a recent phenomenon, though it became more pronounced from the nineteenth century onwards, with the widespread change in musicians' status from paid employees to freelance 'entrepreneurs' (Weber, 2004). However, as is the case with other music industries today, the production of library music is informed by a fundamentally capitalist perspective, where time is thought of as a scarce resource that must be carefully managed to ensure greater efficiency and productivity (Wajzman, 2015: 39) – in other words, a logic where 'Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent' (Stine and Volmar, 2021: 24).

## Concluding remarks

This article set out to identify and scrutinise the multiple ways in which a perceived 'lack of time' (shared by composers, video creators and their viewers), and the accelerated behaviours and processes it promotes, determines every step in the creation and use of library music. The sonic profile of library tracks (be it their instrumentation, harmonic complexity, melodic development, or even the use of stereotypes) is crucially informed by composers' strategies to catch the attention of hurried clients. Composers also adapt the musical structure and progression of a track so as to ensure it will be easy (and quick) to cut up or otherwise modify as clients see fit. Library music thus reveals parallels with other realities of cultural production, where digitalisation, and ensuing temporal pressures, have reconfigured not only production processes and consumption habits but also cultural and artistic objects themselves.

As is the case with other cultural industries where individuals attempt to balance different professional activities (or a multitude of tasks that go beyond what is conventionally understood as 'creative'), composers' relationship to library music becomes fundamentally anchored in strategic temporal considerations: what they compose (and how), where they publish it, how tracks are tagged and presented in a catalogue, and how library music is understood in relation to other artistic endeavours. While ever-present concerns for optimizing time have always been present in this music industry, they have become more pronounced with its transition to digital and dematerialised formats. The new possibilities brought by the transition of libraries to online platforms, such as the inclusion of the waveforms of tracks, have contributed to a more rushed and fragmented listening experience for users. The multifaceted ways in which these recent developments have transformed practices and expectations in library music is reminiscent of Wajcman's (2018: 18) words on the topic of digital technologies: 'In their own way, almost all new technologies are deployed (...) to save time, to spend it more effectively or more productively'.

Nevertheless, we must take into account that composers' views of the time constraints that shape their activity are far from being homogenous: while some see them unfavourably, experiencing their work as a 'daily grind', others regard them more positively, describing their fast-paced composition as a creative challenge and as a way to avoid feeling 'blocked' by perfectionism. Similarly, when it comes to the perspective of videographers and video editors, they too reveal varying attitudes in their rushed interactions with library music, with different approaches and priorities when it comes to browsing libraries, selecting tracks, and synchronizing them with images.

Broadly speaking, however, when videographers work a library track into their videos, they too are guided by constant efforts to quickly catch and keep the interest of viewers whose attention is vied for by a plethora of media. Library music thus becomes a key component in videographers' strategies to keep viewers engaged. In addition, well-established musical stereotypes, of

which library music is rife, prove useful to video creators in order to rapidly set the tone of a video and convey a specific message, with instantly recognisable musical conventions that act as communication shortcuts.

When it comes to the production and consumption of music today, library music isn't the only context in which a perceived acceleration affects a wide range of practices and habits. Among other examples, the undeniable popularity of streaming services has been connected to the increased importance placed on the ease and speed of access to music (*cf.* Cook, 2019). The case of library music, however, is particularly striking when we consider the innumerable (and sometimes unexpected) facets of its composition, presentation and use that are tied to widespread concerns of limited time, inviting us to examine how other musical practices today might be intrinsically shaped by a shared sense of urgency. Agents who create and use library music are guided by an awareness of their own 'lack of time', as well as that of those whose attention they endeavour to catch. These considerations, naturally, impact this music industry in broader ways, with, among others examples, emerging music licensing models where speed is valued above all else. But it is perhaps especially telling that this perceived 'lack of time' also has implications for this music's sonic characteristics themselves, making library music truly a matter of time.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a PhD research grant from the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia [SFRH/BD/132254/2017].

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### **Notes**

1. In order to ensure the anonymity of interviewees, their names were replaced by pseudonyms.
2. It is worth noting that, prior to the 1930s, cue sheets and musical anthologies were widely used for the accompaniment of silent film (Kalinak, 2014: 615), thus firmly

- establishing the practice of selecting pre-existing music for films according to mood and narrative categories (a principle which is still at the heart of library music today).
3. Expressions such as 'saving time' (which feature frequently in the discursive practices of composers and video editors) will be used here while bearing in mind their fluid and socially constructed nature. Although our day-to-day use of these words tends to reify the idea of 'time' (Cunha, 2008: 91; Gell, 1992), I do not intend to present it as something measurable and with a fixed meaning. However, such expressions are particularly useful to understand how the various agents who interact with library music manage the feelings of urgency that are ever-present in their work.
  4. The possibility of creating and updating playlists did not truly exist before libraries transitioned to online and digital formats, where the textual descriptors and categories of a track, rather than being fixed, can be altered over time.
  5. In an interview conducted for this research, Peter Cox, head of library KPM in the 1970s, comments on this same incident, and also describes this rushed composition in a positive light: '[Mansfield] loved to leave things for the last moment, it gave him a buzz to do it'.

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