

Redefining Musician Value: A Thematic Analysis of Historical and Contemporary Musicianship in the Gig Economy

Ryan Hanzel D.R. Monakil, Francis Michael P. Yambao,

Graduate School, Centro Escolar University Manila
9 Mendiola Street, San Miguel, Manila City, Philippines
rdmonakil@ceu.edu.ph

Abstract

This study explores how musicians define and find their value within both the institutional high-level practice and freelance gig settings focusing on the tension between classical training and the realities of the gig economy. By using historical writings, archived letters, books, and modern-day reflections this study connects the lives of past masters like Mozart, Liszt, and Berlioz to today's working musicians who face similar issues of instability, recognition, and purpose. Using a thematic analysis, the research examines secondary data drawn from historical letters, memoirs, books, and online writings. Sources include historical letters from Mozart, Liszt, and Berlioz, anecdotal accounts from Kabayao (1972), historical writings from Navarro (2012), and contemporary online writings by Ryan Monakil (2025). Thematic coding identified recurring patterns across time, including income and financial instability, contractual and institutional constraints, networking and patronage, entrepreneurship and self-organization, social obligations and purpose in work. Findings show that while the music profession has evolved, many of the same patterns of instability, passion, service, and sense of calling remains. Institutions however still cling to rigid hierarchies that undervalue the work of freelance gig-based musicians. The study suggests that music schools and cultural organizations should consider broadening topics in music programs to include real-world skills necessary for survival in the contemporary music landscape. By integrating business, networking, and social awareness into the music programs, music institutions can better prepare musicians for sustainable, more stable careers that reflect the diverse realities of musical labor today. This can help honor the music profession whether performing in concert halls, events places, hotel lounges, and even in absurd spaces the shared tradition of artistry and purpose remain.

Keywords: *Gig economy, musicianship, thematic analysis, institutional hierarchy, music education, financial instability, artistic purpose*

Academic Profile

Ryan Hanzel D.R. Monakil, MBA is a musician, researcher, and educator affiliated with Centro Escolar University Manila. His research focuses on the intersection of music labor, gig economy dynamics, and institutional values in the contemporary Philippine music



landscape.

Dr. Francis Michael P. Yambao is an academic and industry leader. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication, holds a double master's degree in Linguistics and Business Administration, and a double doctorate degree in Educational Management and in Business. Throughout his career, Dr. Yambao has demonstrated a commitment to education and leadership. He has served in various roles, including Program Chair, Dean, Principal and VP for Academics for various institutions. Currently, Dr. Yambao serves as the president and chairman of the Speech Communication Organization of the Philippines (SCOP) and P.R.O of the Philippine Association of Graduate Education (PAGE). He is also the Dean at the Graduate School of Centro Escolar University, where he continues to share his expertise and passion for education.

Introduction

Throughout history, musicians have been indispensable to human society — performing in churches, royal courts, public festivals, and city streets alike. Far from being mere entertainers, musicians have shaped culture, ritual, and identity across civilizations. Whether trained under the finest mentors or forged through years of lived performance, the worth of a musician has never been purely academic; it is expressed through the stories each performance tells. This long and varied tradition of musical labor forms the foundation of what we now recognize as professional musicianship.

The modern music profession, however, operates within a dramatically transformed landscape. Scholars in the creative industries have documented how artistic work has become increasingly unstable, individualized, and dependent on short-term arrangements rather than long-term institutional support (Umney & Kretsos, 2020). Musicians today navigate what might be called a hybrid economy — one that fuses artistic passion with entrepreneurial necessity, and in which digital platforms and freelance networks have come to function as new forms of patronage, criticism, and audience (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2022). These structural shifts have redefined the nature of musical work and raised pressing ethical questions about sustainability, fairness, and creative identity within the profession (Tsioulakis, 2021). The first move is establishing a Territory. Here, you introduce your research topic and explain why it is essential. This means you demonstrate that people care about the subject and that there is considerable interest or existing knowledge in this area. You may also want to mention some previous studies to provide context and help the reader see the bigger picture.

Despite this evolving landscape, a persistent and largely unexamined hierarchy



continues to shape how musicians are valued. Classical and institutionally affiliated musicians who are tied to orchestras, conservatories, or formal academies are routinely accorded greater prestige than gig musicians who perform in lounges, events, or recording sessions, even when both groups share equivalent training and artistry. This hierarchy is particularly ironic given that the classical tradition itself was historically grounded in forms of gig work: composers such as Mozart and Haydn depended on commissions, patronage, and service-based music-making for their livelihoods. Practices that closely mirror the freelance arrangements of today.

While existing scholarship has addressed themes of gig work and uncertainty in the creative industries, critical gaps remain. Historical studies of patronage and freelancing rarely draw connections to the contemporary gig economy. Literature on gig musicians tends to frame their experiences in terms of survival and economic uncertainty, neglecting deeper ethical and philosophical questions of how musicianship is valued across institutional and freelance contexts. Furthermore, research has often focused on talent in isolation, overlooking how highly trained classical musicians negotiate identity, agency, and meaning when working outside formal institution. Equally underexplored is how institutional philosophies themselves function to enforce hierarchies, limit opportunity, and shape perception within the profession. This study addresses these gaps by examining how the value of musicians is constructed across both institutional and freelance contexts, situating present-day gig work within a longer historical and ethical framework. Drawing on the lived experiences of classically trained musicians who now participate in the gig economy, as well as historical accounts from Western classical traditions, this research challenges the dominant hierarchies that define musical worth. It argues that "gigging" is not a lesser form of musical labor but rather a continuation of traditions that have always sustained the practice of music — from the patronage systems of Baroque Europe to the event stages and session studios of today.

Specifically, this study aims to: (1) trace the historical continuity between patronage and freelance traditions and the contemporary gig economy; (2) examine the ethical and philosophical dimensions of how a musician's value is defined; (3) explore the lived experiences of musicians across different historical and modern contexts; and (4) analyze how institutional philosophies sustain hierarchies and constrain professional opportunity. By doing so, this research contributes to broader conversations in musicology, labor studies, and music education — offering both an ethical framework for understanding gig musicians' contributions



and a call for more inclusive definitions of musical legitimacy.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in theories of creative labor, gig economy dynamics, and historical musicology. The theoretical framework draws upon Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2022) conceptualization of creative work as increasingly precarious and project-based, situating musical labor within broader patterns of cultural industry transformation. Tsioulakis's (2021) cultural politics of the gig economy provides a lens for understanding how musicians negotiate identity and value under unstable conditions. Historical perspectives from Burney (1773–1789) and the primary correspondence of Mozart, Liszt, and Berlioz anchor the analysis in longstanding traditions of patronage and self-organized performance.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study positions musician value as constructed at the intersection of institutional recognition, economic stability, social networking, and intrinsic purpose. It compares the patronage-dependent musician of the classical era with the gig-dependent musician of today, tracing how both navigate similar conditions of financial uncertainty, contractual ambiguity, and the search for meaning in their work. The framework identifies six thematic pillars: (1) Income and Financial Instability, (2) Contractual and Institutional Constraints, (3) Networking and Patronage, (4) Entrepreneurship and Self-Organization, (5) Social Obligations, and (6) Purpose in Work.

Research Questions

1. How do historical patterns of patronage and freelance musicianship relate to the experiences of contemporary gig musicians?
2. What ethical and philosophical questions arise when comparing the value of institutional versus gig-based musicians?
3. How have musicians across history negotiated agency, purpose, and meaning in their work?
4. In what ways do institutional philosophies sustain hierarchies that limit opportunities and recognition for gig musicians?

Literature Review

The literature on musical labor has grown substantially in recent decades, reflecting broader scholarly interest in the creative industries and the gig economy. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2022)



examine creative work as increasingly unstable and individually borne, arguing that musicians and other cultural workers face structural conditions that undermine long-term career sustainability. Tsioulakis (2021) extends this analysis by focusing on the cultural politics of the gig economy, exploring how musicians construct professional identities in the absence of institutional support.

Historical scholarship, including Burney's (1773–1789) comprehensive history of music, documents the long tradition of freelance and patronage-dependent musicianship in Western classical traditions. Primary sources, including the correspondence of Mozart, Liszt, and Berlioz, reveal recurring struggles with contractual disputes, financial instability, and institutional gatekeeping that parallel modern gig conditions. Navarro's (2012) study of colonial-era Philippine music education adds a non-Western perspective, showing how institutional philosophies tied musicianship to national service and cultural identity. Umney and Kretsos (2020) provide a critical introduction to the gig economy's impact on creative labor, framing these conditions within political economy.

Method

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive research design to examine how musicians have been valued across historical contexts and within contemporary practice. A thematic coding approach applied to the materials in order to trace recurring ideas about value, recognition, hierarchy, income, networking, and the purpose of work in music.

The data consist of three main categories of secondary sources:

1. Historical Letters – Personal letters written by composers Mozart and Liszt that reveal relevant themes in the topics laid out.
2. Books and Memoirs – Scholarly and autobiographical writings that provide historical and philosophical perspectives on musicianship and labor.
3. Online Posts – Modern-day reflections such as social media posts and personal writings that document how present-day musicians experience and interpret their work.

These materials were coded for themes that encompass both historical and modern contexts. The coding process showed continuity and divergence in how musicians describe instability, institutional dependence, financial concerns, and intrinsic fulfillment through music. Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was maintained especially in relation to the researcher's own materials included in the dataset, ensuring a balance between insider perspective and scholarly distance.

Sample

The corpus consists of fourteen (14) data sources (H1–H14), drawn from three categories: historical letters and memoirs (H1–H9), institutional and scholarly texts (H10–



H12), and contemporary online writings (H13–H14). Sources span from the 18th century to 2025, encompassing Western classical and Philippine musical traditions.

Instrument

No standardized instrument was employed. Data collection relied on a researcher-constructed corpus log organizing each source by author, year, excerpt, theme, relevance, and modern connection. Thematic coding was the primary analytical tool.

Design

A qualitative thematic analysis design was employed, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. No specialized software was used; coding was performed manually to allow closer interpretive engagement with the texts, emphasizing both semantic and latent meanings.

Ethical Considerations

All sources used are publicly available historical documents, published scholarly works, or publicly accessible social media posts. The researcher's own writings (H13, H14) are included as primary sources with full disclosure of the researcher's identity and positionality. Reflexivity was maintained throughout to ensure scholarly distance from insider perspectives.

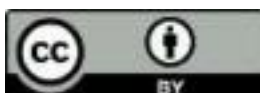
Statistical Treatment

Given the qualitative nature of this study, no statistical treatment was applied. Analysis proceeded through manual thematic coding, with findings organized into concept clusters and refined into interconnected themes.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the collected corpus consisting of historical letters, memoirs, books, and modern-day online posts revealed recurring themes that cut across both past and present accounts of musicians' lives. Despite differences in context and era, musicians consistently dealt with issues of income instability, negotiation of value, and dependence on networks or institutions. At the same time a strong sense of purpose and fulfillment in music-making persisted even with many accounts emphasizing music's cultural, social, and ethical role. These findings are presented into themes showing how the struggles and aspirations of musicians in earlier centuries parallel those of contemporary performers in the gig economy.

The following Corpus Log and Thematic Coding Table provide the foundation for the analysis and serve as the basis of the study's findings.



The corpus log (H1–H14) gathers historical writings, memoirs, institutional texts, and contemporary reflections including the researcher's own manuscripts that were written before the study was conducted to build a broad evidence base on how musicians have navigated issues of income, instability, purpose, and recognition across time. Each entry is coded with themes and is linked to its modern relevance, ensuring relevance between past accounts and the current realities of gig musicians. (See separate Corpus Log file.)

Thematic Coding Table

Theme	Description	Examples (H#)
Income & Financial Instability	Musicians faced unstable earnings, underpayment, and losses in self-organized concerts, yet continued to perform and create.	H1 (Leopold Mozart's survival jobs), H2 (Manzuoli dispute), H3 (concert losses), H6/H8 (Liszt's pay disputes), H11 (Philippine orchestras), H12 (Kabayao's community concerts).
Contractual / Institutional Constraints	Institutions and patrons imposed rules, undervaluation, or rigid structures that limited musicians' agency.	H2 (Manzuoli and opera contract), H4 (Mozart negotiating opera), H7 (Liszt's court duties), H8 (publishing bureaucracy), H10 (colonial music education).
Networking & Patronage	Reliance on patrons, friends, and personal networks to gain work, sustain projects, or open opportunities.	H5 (Mozart's patrons in Mannheim/Paris), H9 (Liszt with Dumas & friends), H10–H11 (colonial ensembles), H12 (Kabayao's outreach networks).
Entrepreneurship & Self-Organization	Musicians often organized their own benefit concerts, projects, or teaching ventures to sustain themselves.	H3 (self-funded concert), H9 (benefit-mongering), H12 (Kabayao's outreach concerts).



Theme	Description	Examples (H#)
Social Obligations of Musicians	Engagements included non-artistic obligations (banquets, court dinners, appearances), showing blurred lines between artistic and social labor.	H7 (Liszt's banquets & court life).
Purpose in Work	Despite instability, musicians found meaning in artistry, service, national identity, and the transformative power of music.	H1 (Leopold Mozart's purpose in recognition), H3/H4 (Mozart's resilience and ambition), H5 (hopeful outlook), H6 (Liszt still committed), H10–H12 (music for service, identity, community).

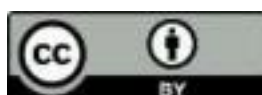
The thematic coding table combines recurring ideas from the corpus into broader categories: income instability, networks and patronage, purpose and fulfillment, and institutional gatekeeping. Recent entries (H13 and H14), gathered from the researcher's own writings, add new insights on inclusivity, identity, and the rejection of hierarchical boundaries in defining the musician. Together, these themes frame the ethical and philosophical questions that underscores the study.

Conclusions

This study has shown that the challenges faced by musicians today: financial instability, undervaluation, institutional hierarchies, and the constant need for patronage are not new but have persisted across centuries. From Mozart's struggles with contracts, Liszt persistent problems with publishers and self-financed concerts to modern musicians balancing gigs, sessions, and freelance work, the profession has always been marked by both instability and resilience yet, through this instability, musicians consistently find purpose in their craft, grounding their work in passion, service, and love of the art. Institutions, however, have often failed to adapt to the changing times, holding onto rigid hierarchies that exclude or undervalue gig musicianship despite its central role in music's history. Recognizing its relevance offers an opportunity to reframe how we teach, value, and support musicians whether in the "Classical" or modern setting.

This reflection shows that music is more than a career. It is a calling that carries both struggles and profound meaning by bridging history with the realities of the modern gig economy. In understanding the similarities of the situations from the past to the present, we can begin to see musicians not as divided into "classical" or "gigging," but as part of one continuous tradition of artistry, survival, and purpose and we can also find solutions in the consistent problems musicians have faced throughout centuries.

Music is a powerful tool that has been used throughout history. Musicians hold so much power



but have failed to see it as such. Understanding the value that a musician can give the world may it be intrinsic or extrinsic can help create more meaningful connections not just in the music industry but in other forms of art as well. Musicians hold power but a musician needs more tools in order to utilize it better. Higher-level institutions must broaden their horizons. Make music and its many aspects more available and accessible and also treat all music as part of a whole. Not one lesser, not one better. Each side serves a different purpose and each one can be a tool to do good in society.

Ethically, undervaluing gig work ignores their equal contribution to cultural life and reinforces a hierarchy that no longer reflects the realities of the profession. Many inspirations of Classical music today have come by the way of social media, content made by independent artists that will soon inspire generations of more musicians who will seek classical or higher level training. We cannot just dismiss gig work as a lesser form if it bridges the gap and raise awareness for the music of the masters. By acknowledging that purpose, skill, and value are not confined to institutions, we move closer to a more inclusive understanding of musicianship. In this way the study fulfills its aim of redefining musician value within the context of ethics, hierarchies, and the gig economy, showing that musicians whether in concert halls, lounges, or community spaces belong to one shared tradition of artistry and service.

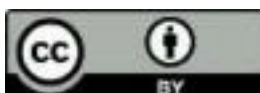
Recommendations

Based on the discussions and findings, these recommendations are presented:

1. **Curriculum Enhancement:** Music schools and higher educational institutions should expand beyond performance and pedagogy to include entrepreneurship, networking, financial literacy, and basic business management. Developing these areas help prepare musicians for the realities of today's music culture and industry.
2. **Recognition of Gig Musicianship:** Educators and program heads should begin to treat gig musicianship as a historically grounded practice. Skills like improvisation, understanding of pop sensibilities, music production, etc. needs to fit into formal training programs, recognizing it not as add-ons but as a legitimate and historically rooted form of professional practice that creates well-rounded musicians.
3. **Policy and Cultural Support:** Government officials, lawmakers, and leaders of the industry should strive to create opportunities and give equity to musicians through rate standardization, unions, and contract standardization for qualified musicians.
4. **Future Research:** Since research done on this topic is limited, further research on other aspects that touch on the topics of musician value, the gig economy, and other related topics can be done.

Acknowledgment

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to the Graduate School of Centro Escolar University Manila for the institutional support provided throughout this research. Special thanks are due to the musicians and scholars whose historical correspondence and contemporary reflections form the backbone of this study.



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