Redefining aesthetics in music educational and professional contexts:
A post-human perspective on women's well-beings in music ecosystems

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Hello everyone, I am Dr. Luna Xinlu Zheng, based at University College London, Institute of Education. Huge thanks to the conference committee for coordinating the conference. Thank you very much. In my presentation I will share with you a posthuman perspective on contemporary aesthetics and women's well-beings in music educational and professional contexts.

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Before entering the discussion on aesthetics, I would like to first explain the perspective on posthumanism in contemporary music social and cultural research. Traditionally, cultural institutions, rules of musical practices, and conventional aesthetic norms were dominant in music educational and professional systems. As an increasingly globalized and digitalized area, educational research and practices on music are moving toward a posthuman stance where a repositioning of epistemology indicates surpassing the historically institutionalised learning and working cultures, rules, norms, and situating a human individual onto the "reconfiguration(s) of posthuman bod(ily)" assemblages, environmental stimuli, and "music (cultural) spaces" (<u>Burnard & Köbli, 2024</u>). Here, posthumanism offers a gateway into detailed understandings of contemporary human living conditions.

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With this perspective in mind, I am going to present two thematic life stories, illustrating the learning and working experiences of two female professional musicians. The two stories focus on their life experiences most relevant to my **research questions**: First, in the respective life contexts of the professional female musicians, what are the constraints or stimuli that have supported or challenged their educational or professional well-beings? Second, How did they navigate music careers within these environments to achieve artistic originality and wider recognition?

The two female musicians are working full-time as a composer and a producer respectively, in two countries, and both at the stage of mid-career. At this stage they have gained reputations at their situated cultures, while aiming for developing music careers internationally. Due to the ethics of my research, I cannot disclose the identity information of the two female musicians (Zheng, <u>2022</u>, <u>2023</u>).

In my data analysis I used a two-fold qualitative framework. I first configured thematic life stories to focus on the experiences of the two female musicians tailoring to the research questions. Then I conducted contextual analysis on the two life stories and will present a synthesized discussion on the emerging trends and future directions in music education and industry ecosystems.

Slide 4: Xing's life story

Now let me introduce Xing, a female mid-career composer working with contemporary art exhibitions and programmes.

{PLAY THE RECORDING}

At her childhood, Xing encountered several challenges for her well-beings in music*.

*Initial analysis of the original data is reserved in this open access presentation in compliance of the confidentiality and ethics of my research (Zheng, 2022, 2023). The paragraph below summarizes the initial analysis.

…… (initial analysis)

Under these circumstances, Xing gave up pursuing a career in classical music, switched her primary instrument, and gained recognition in another musical genre at her adolescence and young adulthood. Then she moved to another country and managed to establish a music career based on a new emerging genre. Since her young adulthood, Xing has been advocating for social equality in her living contexts, collaborating widely with contemporary art exhibitions in several countries, and teaching at educational institutions. These cross-fields endeavours will help her to gain more accomplishments in music and beyond.

Slide 5: Chloe's life story

Now let me introduce Chloe, a female mid-career music producer, entrepreneur, and band leader* (*see above).

{PLAY THE RECORDING}

…… (initial analysis)

By far, Chloe has gained substantial professional connections and increasing reputations in music production. She then joined a newly established music company as one of the stakeholders, gaining more artistic and financial independences as a mature music producer. Since after her research participation (Zheng, 2023), Chloe and her colleagues have been seeking cross-cultural collaborations through artist residency projects and working with news media companies. It remains uncertain whether her band would like to write and produce genre-mixing music, but I will not be surprised if they are holding such an artistic-professional vision for the future.

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Now I present a contextual analysis of the two life stories.

In my pervious paper (Zheng, 2024), I have discussed that people in classical music and a few other music professional fields had to follow strictly linear career trajectories, for example, entering elite

music institutes or performing with reputed music ensembles, so as to be regarded as promising for future successes in music careers. My discussion follows this line of thought.

Conventionally, the aesthetics of certain music professional fields were defined and persisted by the elite groups, which were evident in Xing's and Chloe's educational and professional experiences with "gatekeepers" ([Väkevä et al., 2022](#); [Zheng, 2024](#)). These are people in the positions where they can use discriminative judgments against students and young professionals from the less privileged backgrounds, influencing their career decisions and navigations, regardless of whether the youngsters have achieved "artistic excellence" or their original productions have been recognised as creative in local music ecosystems (ibid.). These were evident in Xing's and Chloe's experiences. In such fields with "meritocratic elitism" ([Väkevä et al., 2022](#)), convention and criticality have lost their abilities to encourage more "inclusive pedagogies" ([Maclean, 2023](#)), such as music improvisation, cross-cultural collaboration, or genre-crossing composition, but rather, have persisted the hierarchies. Over the long periods of historical development, people in these music professional fields adhere to social and cultural conventions and pass down static mindsets to the next generation, who, without internalising these field structures, could not have survived their careers in music (e.g., [Citron, 1993](#)). In this way, conventional aesthetics and institutional cultures are reproduced across generations, inhibiting the cultivation of new curriculum, pedagogy, or art form in music.

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Scholars have made suggestions on ways forward in music learning and professional contexts. Apart from the "inclusive pedagogies" mentioned above, which would be suitable for music teachers, other environmental stimuli, such as supportive families, peers, communities, role models, etc., could be as important. Furthermore, establishing a "comprehensive musicianship" encompassing performances, creative music making, "critical listening and analysis", appreciations of diverse "musical styles", and so on, could facilitate "communication and understanding" among young learners and professionals with different backgrounds ([Willoughby, 2021](#)).

Based on this redefinition of musicianship in contemporary music ecosystems, I would like to reconceptualize **aesthetics** as **ongoing reflections of life and cultural forms**. Compared to its conventional understanding, this redefinition of aesthetics allows more possibilities for new forms of learning and working, hybridisation of art forms and artistic styles, as well as diverse career portfolios and trajectories in contemporary music ecosystems. It also reflects that conventions contributing to the standardization and institutionalization of aesthetics in traditional music genres could have been fading away in certain social-cultural contexts ([Santoro, 2015](#)).

With the extensive impacts of globalization and digitalization, traditional music genres are becoming fragmented with many sub-genres, whereas hybrid and emerging genres have been proliferating. These phenomena inform dynamics of social and cultural changes where the youngsters are living, learning, and working on a daily basis. A professional career in music, as the experiences of the two female musicians have demonstrated, usually entail portfolio trajectories, a diverse range of music creations, cross-fields and cross-cultural collaborations, and so on. The highly digitalized music industries provide more opportunities for young learners and professionals in music while giving rise to new challenges. Young professionals in music, including Xing and Chloe, aspire to establish multi-cultural assemblages ([Sylvester & O'Reilly, 2017](#)) at the digitalized and hybridized professional music

fields, so that they can have support not only from the significant people around them, but also anybody that can potentially support their career navigation and establishment.

My analysis and discussion in this presentation do not only represent current social and cultural trends in music-related professions. Young people nowadays care less about conventional aesthetics or "admiration-based" working culture (Johansen, 2023, cited in Zheng, 2024), but prefer a divergence from essentialist aesthetics and moving towards a hybridization of traditional genres and emerging artistic styles. Therefore, by adopting a posthuman approach toward research and practices in these areas, it is possible that in future, we can facilitate and co-create more democratic and participative learning and working environments in music and beyond.

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Thank you very much! Happy to connect for further discussions.

Declaration

The author declares no conflicts of interest or AI assistance in this work.

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