NEW APPROACHES TO
SOUND, MUSIC, AND MEDIA

LIBRARY MUSIC AND IMAGINED IMAGES

Júlia Durand

BLOOMSBURY

Library Music and Imagined Images

New Approaches to Sound, Music and Media

Series Editors: Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott

Forthcoming Titles:
Found Footage Films: A Work of Experimental Scholarship by Justin Remes
Musical New Media by Nicola Dibben
David Bowie and the Transformation of Music Video by Lisa Perrott
Popular Music, Race, and Media since 9/11 by Nabeel Zuberi

Published Titles:
Remediating Sound: Repeatable Culture, YouTube and Music
edited by Holly Rogers, Joana Freitas, and João Francisco Porfírio
David Bowie and the Art of Music Video by Lisa Perrott
Haunted Soundtracks: Audiovisual Cultures of Memory, Landscape and Sound
edited by K. J. Donnelly and Aimee Mollaghan
Traveling Music Videos edited by Tomáš Jirsa and Mathias Bonde Korsgaard
Vincenzo Bellini on Stage and Screen, 1935–2020 edited by Emilio Sala, Graziella Seminara, and Emanuele Senici
Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic: Music, Modernity and Transmedia Art by Joe Jackson
Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context
by Juan Bermúdez
Aesthetic Amalgams and Political Pursuits: Intertextuality in Music Videos
edited by Tomasz Dobrogoszcz, Agata Handley, and Tomasz Fisiak
Anonymous Sounds: Library Music and Screen Cultures in the 1960s and 1970s
edited by Nessa Johnston, Jamie Sexton, and Elodie A. Roy
Visual Music: A History and Theory of the Abstract Moving Image
by Henry Balme
Tyler, The Creator's Hip Hop Revolution: Beyond Gangsta
by Gustavo Souza Marques
Library Music and Imagined Images by Júlia Durand

Library Music and Imagined Images

Júlia Durand

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 1359 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland, 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2026
Paperback edition published 2027

Cover design by Elena Durey
Cover photo: © DEV IMAGES/Getty

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 979-8-7651-5300-0
PB: 979-8-7651-5299-7
ePDF: 979-8-7651-5302-4
eBook: 979-8-7651-5303-1

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India

For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

Contents

Illustrations

Acknowledgements

My first thanks are owed to the interviewees who shared their time and knowledge so generously with me. Without their insight and wit, this book could not be what I hoped for it.

I am grateful to Audio Network, Bibliotheque Music and Scott Buckley for giving me permission to reproduce images of their websites. Library music is ever entangled with visual elements in some way, and to be able to illustrate this more tangibly in the book enriches it tremendously.

My affectionate thanks to CESEM: I could not hope for a more welcoming and intellectually diverse research centre to call my scholarly home. I was fortunate enough to benefit from Paula Gomes Ribeiro's scientific guidance, steadfast encouragement, and deeply touching human qualities, and I am even more fortunate to now call her a friend.

A heartfelt thanks to Toby Huelin and James Deaville, two scholars whose exceptional work, kindness and sense of humour have continuously amazed me these past few years. I have always been drawn to the research of library music, but to do it alongside such colleagues and friends is truly a privilege.

I am thankful as well to the long-time friends who have put up with my (at times overly enthusiastic) interest in library music – and, better yet, who have matched it with an interest of their own. Rafaela, we will always have 'Mountain Justice'.

I hope to always remain true to my interdisciplinary streak, and, on that note, there are two anthropologists I would like to thank: Manuela Ivone Cunha and Jean-Yves Durand. By a formidable stroke of luck on my end, they also happen to be my parents.

To my partner in crime, who can fit so very much in three letters only, 'thank you' feels like very little; so I will hold my peace.

‘The music industry’s step-child’: An introduction to library music

Library music has been called many things; chief among them, perhaps, ‘wallpaper’. While it might be odd to stare at wallpaper, that is what I intend to do.

Library music consists of sound recordings that are made for future use in all kinds of media and contexts: from reality television to online cat videos, on-hold tunes to radio broadcasts, film trailers to fashion stores, car advertisements to in-flight safety videos. Although this music may be licensed for a variety of uses, it is overwhelmingly found in audiovisual media. The cost of licensing a library track is typically lower than that of commissioning a bespoke score (or of clearing a well-known pop hit): as such, library music is largely used in productions that lack the budget (or time) to hire a composer. We stumble constantly on library music in our day-to-day lives as media consumers, but we chiefly encounter it in media that tends to slip through the gaps of our attention. In other words, we constantly hear library music, but we rarely hear it being spoken of.

As such, despite its ubiquity in the contemporary media landscape, library music as an industry and artistic practice remains mostly hidden from the public eye – as do library composers. And yet, a significant number of people come into contact with this music, whether to create it or to use it. A large number of musicians take part in this industry, from those who regard it as a ‘side job’ to those who have it as their sole source of income. As for the media producers who use it, their number has increased tremendously since the twentieth century: with its transition to digital and online media, library music is no longer exclusively used by professionals and is now also an important resource for hobbyists.

Today, this music is largely accessed online, in websites where library tracks are categorized by mood, emotion, instrumentation and genre, among other possibilities. These online catalogues offer clients a vast choice of music for their every need – music which, albeit immensely varied in terms of genre and

style, typically follows specific structures to ensure it may be easily synchronized with pictures. In this sense, while library music is not tailor-made for concrete images, it is nevertheless tangled up in visual imaginaries.

This role of discreet, usable music for future images has granted library music a few key traits, which have earned it an unflattering reputation since its beginnings: it has been described as unremarkable, disposable, stereotyped and generic, and as musical wallpaper. Undoubtedly, library music is deliberately discreet. But that should not relegate it to a blind spot of academic research. Though it is often seen as 'discardable' both by its creators and users (owing, for instance, to its ephemerality), it does not follow that scholars should discard it as an object worthy of interest.

This book is rooted in three questions, all of which aim to draw library music away from the obscure place it has typically been assigned to in scholarly literature and popular opinion. What are library music's most defining characteristics as usable music for media? How is it perceived, valued and discussed by its creators and users? Which aspects of its production and use have shifted with its transition to digital media, and which have remained unchanged – and how does this reflect shifting attitudes towards music for media more broadly? These goals are too intertwined to tackle separately. Taking a musicological and sociological lens to the workings of library music, I seek to tease out how it is perceived today, what key traits set it apart from other musical practices, and how its producers and users interact with it.

In particular, I aim to explore library music while avoiding well-worn preconceptions that have long hindered a more in-depth and fleshed-out understanding of its complex (and sometimes contradictory) dimensions. Library music contains a wide spectrum of creative practices and expectations: it may be a carefully planned full-time job or a hobby writing free-to-use music; it may be undertaken reluctantly for financial reasons or, on the contrary, sought out as a creative escape. For media producers, too, it may be only a second choice to score a production, or, instead, a valuable sonic material in which they intervene creatively. The pictures that have been painted of library music are often too reductive to include this multiplicity of perspectives and experiences and have cast it as being of minor cultural significance. The chapters that follow will look beyond music made 'to measure' for specific productions (which has commanded the fair share of academic attention so far) and will instead focus on this little-noticed sonic presence that shapes the media of our everyday lives.

A (brief) historical background

Although library music consists of *recorded* pieces, we can trace its origins (or, at least, its distant cousins) to the music sheet anthologies that were published in the early twentieth century to accompany silent films. These compilations share a few key characteristics with library music: these pieces were meant to accompany future images; they were chiefly categorized according to mood and narrative function, rather than musical genre (Chion 1995: 48); and they both reflected and reinforced conventions of musical accompaniment in cinema (Cooke 2010: 2).

While 1927 marks the year when library music recordings were first commercialized, the fact that these were still incipient experiences has prompted authors such as Hollander (2018) and Hubbert (2014) to point to the 1930s as the birth of the library industry. British DeWolfe Music is widely considered to be the first library music company, and its music was primarily heard in newsreels and radio broadcasts (Lanza 2004: 63), before going on to be used in television programmes and advertisement. In the decades that followed, the production and distribution of library music evolved in tandem with developments in sound recording technologies: in the 1960s, libraries started to distribute their music in vinyl, switching to CDs in the 1980s (Lomax 2018: 380). In the 1990s, this music industry took its first steps towards digital distribution on online platforms, with British library KPM standing out as one of the very first to digitize their catalogue. This shift accelerated dramatically with the transition to the twenty-first century: at this point, various trade publications assiduously started to announce that the catalogues of companies such as Killer Tracks (Lichtman 2000: 49) have been made available online.

While library music remains largely hidden from the wider public, this invisibility (as well as its enduring negative image) has nevertheless decreased gradually in the past decade. Several libraries now publish their music on streaming services such as Spotify, marking a significant change from the logic at the heart of this music: that of functional tracks that are meant to be used in media, rather than sought out by individual listeners. Recent efforts to legitimize library music include the Mark Awards, held annually by the Production Music Association. In addition to these awards, we must also highlight the growing cult following of certain libraries from the 1960s to the 1980s, earning those decades the title of 'golden age' of library music (Durand 2025; Sexton, Roy and Johnston 2025). Library pieces from this period are now discussed and received in ways that could hardly be further removed from its initially inconspicuous context,

with its presentation in concerts and its description as 'sublime masterpieces' (Hollander 2018) hinting at efforts to canonize these once ephemeral pieces.

The transformations brought by the digitalization of library music (along with wider developments in digital tools for sound and video editing) can hardly be overstated. Throughout the twentieth century, this music industry overwhelmingly targeted professional audiovisual producers.[1] With its transition to digital formats and to Web 2.0 platforms, however, the industry's client base widened to include amateur videographers and online content creators. Although we may still describe library music as a 'business-to-business' industry, its market is nevertheless far more diverse today: it may include both a professional video editor working on a popular television programme or a hobbyist videographer creating a personal video to publish on a social network.

The rise of this new market for library music brought on a host of new licensing models. The licences practised by libraries during the twentieth century were relatively homogeneous in their conditions and price ranges, but the industry now presents a far more fragmented and heterogeneous scenario, with a multiplicity of licensing schemes that are more geared towards online media – a context which has vastly different implications and requirements than that of television or cinema. Indeed, the growth of social networks and video-sharing platforms, and of individuals producing videos purely as a hobby, also prompted the appearance of free-to-use library music with Creative Commons licences.

Beyond its relevance in a musicological context, a study of library music is particularly pertinent in the wider context of creative practices in Web 2.0.[2] As the wider availability of digital tools for sound and video editing renders more accessible than ever the copying, cutting, remixing and juxtaposition of media material, authors like Cook (2019: 19–20) point to the 'distinct digital aesthetic' that permeates video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. In this context, the boundaries between professional and amateur productions are increasingly blurred

[1] It is however worth mentioning that there were isolated attempts, in the second half of the twentieth century, to market library albums to individual consumers for their home movies, as detailed in Czach's (2020) fascinating study of this phenomenon.

[2] While future iterations of the web have already been theorized, I use the term Web 2.0 to refer to the platforms, practices and sociabilities that still widely characterize contemporary experiences and interactions with online media. We can highlight, in particular, social networking and online communities, platforms that rely on user-generated content, and phenomenona of participatory culture (Jenkins 2009). Matthew (2008) stresses that the term 'Web 2.0', far from having a narrow and consensual definition, can denote anything from business models to social behaviours and artistic practices. In this sense, the author claims that 'Web 2.0 is about ideas, behaviours, technologies and ideals all at the same time'.

Figure 0.1 Screenshot of Audio Network's homepage (image courtesy of Audio Network).

– and, indeed, the term 'amateur' itself has lost some of the negative connotations that it accrued in the modern era (Richardson and Gorbman 2013: 9).[3] Library music, too, has been deeply transformed by these shifts in cultural production: the relatively uniform workings of this music industry in the twentieth century have now fragmented into a wide array of different practices and criteria.

An (also brief) overview of the industry today

The library music industry, then, experienced both a tremendous growth and fragmentation with the emergence of digital technologies and online platforms. It is now characterized by a wide spectrum of professional practices and a profusion of companies: from vast libraries owned by larger conglomerates with other subsidiaries to smaller, independent catalogues. The 2010s witnessed an explosion of libraries targeting online content creators, with lower licensing prices, or with subscription fees to access and use their tracks.

This book, as stated earlier, is driven by a few different goals. To give a detailed account of the legal intricacies of the licensing models that exist today is, most definitely, not one of them. Some long-established companies practise

[3] Throughout this book, I use the term 'amateur' with no pejorative connotations, and simply to distinguish hobbyist videographers from those who are professionally trained.

more 'traditional' licences (to borrow an emic term that is frequently used by industry practitioners): while agreements between libraries and composers vary significantly, in this context, typically, a licence for a library track must be cleared for each of its uses, and the larger share of composers' revenue will stem from royalties, collected from the broadcast of the production where their music is used. This model now coexists with licences which can be more suited to the specificities of online media, but which render composers' revenue more uncertain. Such licences are often dubbed 'royalty-free', a term which erroneously suggests they are entirely free of copyright, when, in truth, they require a one-time fee to clear a track, and composers will still be entitled to royalties. As Harte (2021: 867) explains, 'royalty free … may (and typically does) require a fixed (noncommission) licensing fee'.

However, more recent libraries, such as Swedish company Epidemic Sound, have caused intense controversy in the industry by implementing a licensing model where composers do indeed forego future royalties, receiving instead a one-off payment for their music. These different libraries (and their widely varying prices, which may range from four digits to only one) target, in theory, different markets: from prestigious, high-budget film trailers to a YouTuber starting a channel on a shoestring budget. However, in practice, these companies do find themselves increasingly in direct competition, causing significant tensions within this industry. And if licensing models such as that of Epidemic Sound have recurrently been described by industry practitioners as disruptive (Graham 2018: 90), the development of artificial intelligence, allowing media producers to use AI-generated tracks rather than library music has, unsurprisingly, caused further disruption in recent years.

There is a vital aspect that must be taken into account when examining library music today. The heterogeneity that digital technologies brought to this industry does not solely apply to its licensing models: the activity of library companies has also become more fragmented across various geographic and national contexts, making library music (as, indeed, many other cultural industries) a highly transnational industry today. Naturally, this does not in the least render irrelevant the local and national realities that provide a legal, social and cultural framework for how a library operates. That being said, to understand the contemporary production and use of library music, it is essential to acknowledge its transnational character. The various actors involved in the composition, production and publishing of a track within a library (to say nothing of its future clients) may all be based in different territories. We can take

a concrete example of this with the track 'Pixie Pizzicati': written by German composer Sebastian Jakoby, it was published by French library Cézame and later used in a trailer for the second season of the British-American television series *The Great*.

Although, once again, we should not dismiss local specificities, libraries' websites share several fundamental traits in how they present tracks, beginning with this music's categorization. Having broadly surveyed the anatomy of this music industry, let us now focus our lens on how the website of a catalogue might look. Although each library will have its own strategies in organizing its musical offer and presenting it to clients, their approaches in classifying music tend to be rooted in a shared set of practices, with underlying logics that we can trace back to the early days of library music. A track is typically presented with a title, description and keywords (or 'tags') as well as the cover image of the album in which it was first published. Its waveform may also be displayed, along with specifically musical information (such as key and beats per minute). Tracks can be categorized according to musical genre, tempo, instrumentation, moods or emotions and types of media productions.

For example, 'Pixie Pizzicati' is tagged with keywords such as 'adventure', 'cinematic', 'steampunk', 'relentless', 'violin', 'interrogative', 'percussive', 'mysterious' and 'acoustic'; and it is described with the following text: 'Hesitating, sparse & on tip-toes intro evolving with minimalist & quirky percussion … intense & swirling orchestra in a mad spirit. Acoustic trailer for dramedy & crazy parties'. These paratexts give information about the sonic characteristics of the track *and* suggest potential narratives and images that it may be worked into.

Some websites may also include detailed subcategories, or they may offer categories which are not as commonly found, such as time periods, countries, movements and textures. While these approaches in categorization vary from library to library, they share a key trait: tracks are presented not only according to musical aspects, but also to visual, emotional and narrative concepts. Indeed, as we have seen, these elements are often fused together in the descriptions and keywords of tracks. Depending on the size and internal functioning of a library, such paratexts may be determined by a team, ensuring a degree of cohesion in the organization of a catalogue; or, in the case of several royalty-free libraries, it may be determined by composers themselves for their own music.

Tracks may also be presented in themed playlists that are regularly renewed by the library. The website of French library Cézame is a good example of this. As of May 2025, Cézame's homepage displayed, among others, the playlists 'World

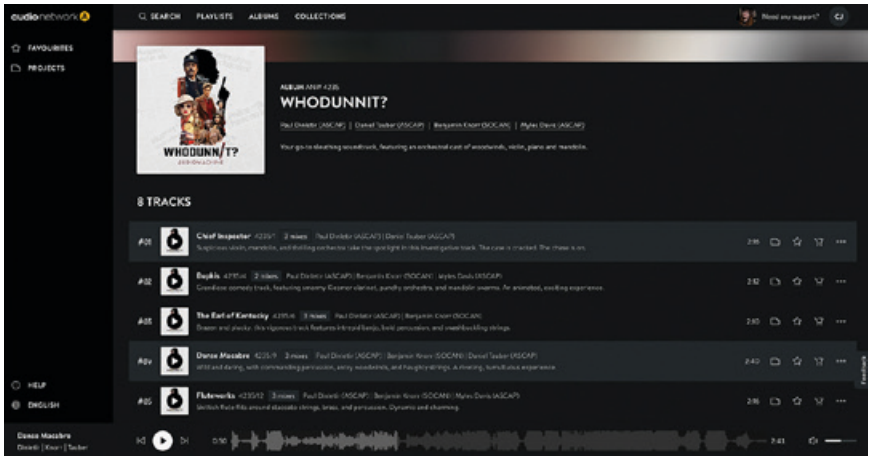

Figure 0.2 How tracks might appear in a library catalogue (image courtesy of Audio Network).

in Tension', 'Climate Denial', 'Fan of White Lotus', 'Fan of Severance', 'Landscape', and 'Feel Good', thus evidencing a combination of timeless themes, current events and freshly released media. In this sense, as will be tackled in Chapter 5, library catalogues and their categorization can present us with a snapshot of sorts of the contemporary media landscape.

As will be explored in the following chapters, the importance of the categories, titles, keywords and other paratexts that frame the reception of library music should not be underestimated. While these texts are neither predictive nor prescriptive of the future uses of a track, which ultimately rest in the hands of the media producers who license it, these paratexts are nevertheless a decisive element in how clients search for, and select, tracks – all while revealing deep-rooted associations between musical sound and extra-musical concepts.

Terminology and its baggage

Since its beginnings, library music has been given a disconcerting abundance of names. To opt for one over the other is no neutral matter: each hints at the ways in which this music is valued or disparaged, the characteristics that define it and the gradual transformation of its image over the past decade. In English-speaking

countries,[4] throughout the twentieth century, library music was also at times called mood music (Lanza 2004), canned music (Alten 2013) and needledrop music (Scott 1990). However, these terms have now been widely replaced by library music, stock music and production music (and, often erroneously, royalty-free music). Although these terms are frequently used as synonyms, they are not quite interchangeable: they carry different connotations, refer to distinct facets of the industry and point to underlying tensions in this art world.

As such, to understand the baggage that this vocabulary carries, we must first take into account the negative reputation that has long clung to library music. Expressions like 'music by the yard' or 'cold, standard stock music' (Stacey and Pearson 2017: 139) imply overused and stale clichés, while recurrent descriptions of library music as 'canned sound' (Alten 2013: 367) with a 'faint aroma of elevator' (Stinson 2004) situate it firmly in the realm of the artless industrial. Though it is currently waning, this reductive and depreciative view of library music as a 'cultural debasement' (Graham 2017c) and as the 'music industry's step-child' (Dillon 2017) has not yet faded, making it at times a synonym of mediocre music. In fact, this view is so entrenched that library practitioners themselves reinforce it, as is perhaps best exemplified by this 2018 slogan on the website of North-American library Video Helper: 'We create production music for people who hate production music'.

To navigate the unfavourable waters in which this music often finds itself, library professionals wield these different terms strategically, so as to distance themselves from a negative image: for instance, by rejecting the name 'stock music'. In English-speaking circles of this industry, 'production music' is increasingly preferred as more prestigious (or, at least, less pejoratively charged) than 'stock' or 'library' (Graham 2018: 102). In this respect, Huelin (2022) stresses that 'stock' can be used to emphasize negative perceptions, especially when opposed to bespoke music for media. In his handbook for library composers, Graham (2018: 222) notes that 'production' has become a euphemistic alternative to 'library' music, 'when the industry wanted to reinvent itself as a high-quality supplier of music for plush productions, disowning a reputation for cheesy low budget light elevator musak that grew up in the 1960s to 80s'. 'Production music' has also been institutionalized in industry contexts, for example, with the foundation of the Production Music Association.

[4] For a detailed discussion of the nomenclature of library music in different languages, see Deaville et al. (2024).

The other terms, however, are still used within this industry: 'production music' is mostly found in high-end companies catering to more prestigious markets, while 'stock music' is relegated to catalogues that target media creators with lower budgets, working in modest (or even amateur) contexts of production. In this respect, we find that the various names applied to library music reflect the fragmentation of this industry in the digital age, as they point us to the many companies, markets and licensing models that exist today. In addition, beyond these aspects that are more directly tied to this industry's functioning, the words 'production', 'stock' or 'library' also highlight different characteristics of this musical practice: the fact that it is meant to be used in media productions; that it 'stocks' ready-to-use recordings in great quantities and that it is systematically labelled and categorized in a catalogue, or 'library'.

I have two motives for opting here for 'library music'. Firstly, although 'production music' has become more prevalent in industry discourses (partly as a legitimation strategy), 'library music' continues to be a widely used term by industry practitioners. Furthermore, as Huelin (2022: 41) argues, most scholarly literature continues to use 'library', 'demonstrating a clear departure between industry- and academic-focused terminology'.

The second motive weighs a little heavier. As stated previously, my primary goal is to hone in on this music's specific properties: and of all the names in use today, 'library' is the one that best brings these specificities to light. The industrial connotations of 'stock' risk contributing to the simplistic view that casts this musical practice as an entirely standardized and commercial-driven endeavour, flattening its multi-layered nature. As for the term 'production', while this music is chiefly (though not exclusively) conceived to be used in media, the same applies to bespoke scores – and, indeed, any so-called commercial or popular music may also be licensed for use in a production. This name, therefore, does not highlight any particularly specific trait. 'Library', however, points to a core defining practice: that of classifying and categorizing music for its future use.

Library music in scholarly literature: Hide-and-seek

While there was, until recently, a dearth of scholarly research focusing on library music, this stands in contrast with studies of similar cultural practices in other domains: for example, stock photography was the focus of a monograph by Paul Frosh in 2003. Indeed, Frosh's account of this visual industry and of

the professional practices of its photographers reveals striking parallels with library music, especially regarding the value judgements that are applied to these cultural objects, their relevance as an affordable resource for media and the expansion and transformation of these industries with the development of digital formats. Some of Frosh's claims on stock photography also apply to library music: in particular, the fact that its deliberately discreet nature renders it a significant force in contemporary culture, shaping cultural conventions in ways that go largely unnoticed.

Thankfully, the lack of research on library music has been increasingly addressed in recent years, with a growing number of publications. We should first and foremost cite the pioneering work of Philip Tagg (2012; 1987; 1982), which tackled library music from a semiotic angle by exploring the sonic formulas found in certain categories (such as 'nature'). Tagg (1987: 288) argued that these libraries constitute 'readily accessible sets of verbal descriptions of musical affect', a stance which later informed his examination of library music's potential for affective manipulation in media (2006).

In a 2012 book chapter, Nardi broaches some of the aesthetic and labour implications of library music's production. The author casts a critical look on the predominance of stereotypes in library music and uses the term 'Entfremdung' to qualify what he deems to be the 'estrangement' of library composers 'from the self and from a community', stating 'a track in a music library neither represents the creator nor the community s/he belongs to; it can be reassembled and refunctionalised in ways that its creator cannot foresee or control' (ibid.: 80). Although this theoretical perspective can give us valuable insights into library music, it does not, in my view, accurately reflect the complex reality of this musical practice and the experiences of its actors.

It is also worth mentioning Meier's (2017: 137) monograph on popular music and branding in digital media, where the author momentarily surveys the categorization found in the royalty-free music websites AudioSparx and Jingle Punks. While these publications focused mostly on questions of production or categorization, other articles and book chapters have examined library music's usage in specific contexts. Deaville (2017; 2006) gives detailed and fascinating accounts of the use of library tracks in cinematic trailers and news broadcasts. Wissner (2015), Haworth (2012) and Czach (2020) have delved into historical questions relating to library music in cinema, television and homemade videos in the twentieth century, respectively. On the topic of fiction television series in North America in the twentieth century, Wissner (2017) has also argued for

the importance of analysing library music's use in order to identify recurring associations between certain sonorities and narratives: '[It] can form a coherent picture of the ways in which we aurally associate certain music with specific events … By using these libraries, music editors and supervisors functioned as hidden authors that allowed the music to add another layer of meaning through their reuse' (ibid.: 158).

More recently, Huelin's publications (2024; 2023; 2022) have become an invaluable reference for the study of library music. Among other topics, Huelin has analysed the use of library tracks in specific television genres, inquiring as well into the role of library composers as anonymous 'hidden figures'. Huelin and Durand (2022) and Durand and Huelin (2024) have also scrutinized the intersection of library music and political action, surveying this music's use in politically driven media. These articles examine how the once unseen library music increasingly seeps into political discourse – and, conversely, how political discourse may inform the presentation of library tracks in catalogues.

Deaville, Durand, Huelin and Morton (2024) co-edited the first journal issue to be exclusively dedicated to library music, addressing its production and use in digital media. In addition to practitioner interviews (Huelin and Mottram 2024) and an inquiry into 'golden age' library music in digital media (Johnston and Roy 2024), the special issue includes a study of the presence (and absence) of library music in academic curricula (Gomes Ribeiro and Malhado 2024), a critical examination of mood tagging and its links to music psychology (Krishnaswami 2024) and an assessment of the increasingly blurred lines between library music and popular music today (Klein 2024).

The volume *Anonymous Sounds: Library Music and Screen Culture in the 1960s and 1970s* (2025), edited by Jamie Sexton, Elodie Roy and Nessa Johnston, presents an in-depth study of the so-called golden age of library music of the 1960s to the 1980s, exploring its recent cult status through sampling and fandom practices. Regarding other historical approaches, we must also highlight the work of Mandell (2002), Lomax (2018) and Hollander (2018). While Mandell's article broaches particular cases of the use of a library track in US television broadcasts in the mid-twentieth century, Lomax's publication is a comprehensive historical overview of the British library KPM (who today holds a legendary status among library enthusiasts). Though not focusing exclusively on library music, tackling instead a broad range of functional music (such as muzak), Lanza's monograph (2004) sheds light on key aspects of library music's production and (de)valuation during the twentieth century. Lanza highlights, for example, the reputation of library practitioners as

'either frustrated musicians who hate what they do or people loosely associated with broadcast media who want to … earn some fast money' (ibid.: 64).

Before library music drew greater notice from scholars, it could be hidden in plain sight in musicological publications on cinema and television, where it was often commented on in passing. These mentions to library music, however brief, can give us precious hints as to how it was commonly discussed and valued both within and beyond academia. In musicological works on music and media, library music is at times evoked as an option that is often motivated by the financial or temporal constraints of a production: 'Stock (or library) music has long been a feature of film and television production and its use tended to be driven by budgetary factors' (Butler 2013: 170). It is therefore typically described in literature as a 'cost-saving … and fast way of providing music' for 'low-budget, high-output films' (Stilwell 2002: 32).

While these definitions of library music are relatively neutral, other descriptions can be more loaded, using vocabulary that emphasizes its industrial production, or its reliance on tried-and-tested formulas: '[Needledrop] refers to music that is prefabricated, multipurpose, and highly conventional. … Needledrop is an inexpensive substitute for original music' (Scott 1990: 223); 'Stock music has been profitable for certain music companies who have sold "music by the yard" (or "by the meter") … [and] who have large rosters of "canned" music' (Donnelly 2002: 333–4). Other authors stress the often formulaic character of library music, while nonetheless pointing to its creative and effective uses in media. For example, Butler (2013: 171) notes that 'for some, the use of stock music is an indicator of genre, standardization, conformity and vulgarity', but argues that this use 'can be dramatically and creatively effective'. Referring to narrative television, Halfyard (2016: 19–20) states that 'Stock or library music has a rather bad name in quality TV' and that 'it is, by its very nature, generic'; however, the author also claims that library music can 'function successfully in the construction of an episode'.

These brief mentions of library music in scholarly literature can tell us much about how it was viewed for most of its history; but it is equally telling when it is not mentioned at all. Books with subject matters where an examination of library music would be particularly relevant either explicitly or implicitly exclude it from their scope. Czach (2020: 212) comments on this blind spot, stating that 'the study of the compilation soundtrack has privileged soundtracks that adopt pre-existing music (be it classical, jazz, pop, opera, etc.) that is *not composed to be used with films* versus compilation

soundtracks that use pre-existing library music that is *specifically composed for use with films*'.

This is partly due to the public invisibility of library music, which (for its most part) is unlikely to be recognized by audiences, and whose composers remain largely anonymous. The fact that it is deliberately discreet, and that it is not (in principle) meant to be sought after by listeners, denies it the potential for notoriety of a Beyoncé hit (or – why not use the same term? – a Mozart hit). In other words, although library music is technically pre-existing music, it is not necessarily recognized as such when it is heard in a production. In *Changing Tunes: The Use of Preexisting Music in Film*, Powrie and Stilwell (2006: xiv) turn their attention to the use of 'preexisting – and particularly *recognizable* – music' in film, an angle which inevitably sets library music aside. Similarly, Godsall's (2018: 6) study of pre-existing music in narrative film excludes library music from its scope, owing to its lack of visibility: 'Library music does not … have the *public* existence – and therefore the history … which I contend is crucial to preexisting music's particular effects in the cinema'.

These factors have contributed to library music's conspicuous absence in research – an omission which, as evidenced earlier, is now well on its way to being redressed. That being said, musicological works broaching library music have until now mostly disregarded online-native media and have focused instead on cinema and television. As such, they have not yet tackled a wider and more varied range of media where library music is used in unpredictable, uncontrollable and often untraceable ways, as is the case of the audiovisual content that now proliferates in video-sharing platforms. Conversely, publications that discuss musical production and consumption in digital and online media (Rambarran 2021) have overwhelmingly privileged a study of popular music, almost entirely discarding library music – despite the fact that it has become an inescapable sonic presence in a significant number of online formats.

Methodological considerations

This book seeks to bridge these gaps in academic literature, by examining the contemporary and digital context of library music's creation and use. To this end, I depart from previous scholarly work in two ways. The publications listed in the previous section, when exploring the use of library music, focus mostly on specific productions or media genres. However, to tease out wider identifiable

trends in library music usage today, I have broadened the angle of this book to inquire into a variety of (predominantly online) media. In addition, these same publications have analysed either library music's production or its usage. While this narrower analytical focus is necessary to broach specific aspects, there are questions that remain unanswered if these two moments in the 'life' of a library track are not observed in tandem, evidencing how each influences and shapes the other. For this reason, I encompass here the viewpoints and experiences of multiple actors who come into contact with library music in some way, from its production to its usage. While some chapters will, inevitably, require a more intensive focus either on library practitioners or on media producers, other questions will require us to combine the perspectives and discourses of these actors, untangling common threads in their views of library music – or, on the contrary, revealing starkly different understandings of this musical practice.

It may have become apparent by now that I have spoken more often of people than of musical sound. It is high time for me to show my theoretical hand: namely, a sociomusicological framework that seeks an understanding of library music through the discursive practices, experiences and interactions of different actors. I approach library music as its own art world, one in which these actors position themselves differently.[5] I am therefore not primarily committed to analysing the sound of library tracks themselves, although this exercise will also be relevant at given points. Musical analysis and historiographical aspects will be present throughout the book not as cornerstones of this research, but rather as complementary approaches that can bolster our understanding of the work of library practitioners and media producers. In other words, my interest lies not so much on library tracks themselves, but rather on the processes surrounding their composition, categorization, promotion and use. And in order to examine library music as a process – or, to borrow Christopher Small's (1998) noun-to-verb neologism, as musicking – we must hone in on the perspectives of those who engage in it.

I am informed here by the work of sociomusicologists like Frith (2003), Hennion (2012), DeNora (2004), Martin (2006) and Gomes Ribeiro (2015), who have explored processes of meaning-making, of legitimation and valuation and of the constant negotiation of the conventions that shape musical creation and

[5] Becker's (1982) definition of an art world casts it as more than a network of interactions between individuals: it is also formed by a set of conventions that shape a cultural object and that determine its value.