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How the pursuit of perfection impacts music recording and performance

An audiovisual thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

How has the pursuit of perfection changed the way that music performance is recorded and presented to the public? How have these changes affected the way music is conceived and performed, and altered its perceived authenticity for listeners?

I examined the trend in music of production towards "perfection" over performance. This trend is exemplified by the way that music recording today tends to involve everything being time aligned to a tempo grid, copy and pasting any repeating sections, and auto-tuning vocals. I also looked into the push back against this trend, with people going back to 1950s style recording, using only a single take of a performance. The former is very versatile, and editable, the latter being a raw performance.

These two extremes seem to be existing with very little lying in the middle, where one could take the positive aspects of both, and combine them to create music that has the feel of an authentic performance, but still retains the polish of studio production (using a 100% digital workflow allows for this flexibility). Essentially taking production techniques of the '70s and '80s, but applying them with modern recording tools.

I recorded one song as a single take by a band, with no editing. The individual stems from this recording then formed the basis of a second version which is polished with studio techniques such as punch-ins, overdubs, and additional material. Finally, the song was reproduced as a time aligned, polished, tuned, 'perfected' version, built up in layers, as is the current standard in music production.

I also delved into the way music is presented using pre-recorded material both online, and at live shows.

Survey questions were based on these alternate recordings of one song, and on preferences regarding performance enhancement. Participants overwhelmingly preferred one version over the others, and had clear views on what they felt was acceptable in how music was presented to them. This presented the very real possibility that the paradigm of seeking perfect performances and productions may not be the best approach for anyone involved.

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The research was found to be low risk, and was submitted with the notification number:
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All thesis audio, video, and associated .pdf files can be found at this google drive link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WZDEDzyxkNeuZZGephgq1I3hMSvFvK1X?usp=sharing>

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Featured music

Bohemian Rhapsody

F. Mercury
Performed by Queen

Flight of the Bumblebee

R. Korsakov
Performed by Jennifer Batten
Performed by Ben Lee
Performed by Taylor Sterling

Great Balls of Fire

O. Blackwell, J. Hammer
Performed by Jerry Lee Lewis

Hedwig's Theme

J. Williams
Performed by Denni Wintyr

Helter Skelter

J. Lennon/P. McCartney
Performed by The Beatles

The Imperial March

J. Williams
Performed by Denni Wintyr

Jolene

D. Parton
Performed by Denni Wintyr

Piece of a Dream

D. Wintyr, E. Graves
Performed by Denni Wintyr

Ride the Nightmare

D. Wintyr, E. Graves
Performed by Denni Wintyr, K. Henderson, and E. Kubala

Sunshine of your Love

J. Bruce, E. Clapton
Performed by Denni Wintyr

Stardust

D. Wintyr, E. Graves
Performed by WintryQueen

While my Guitar Gently Weeps

G. Harrison
Performed by The Beatles (with Eric Clapton)