Postscript on the Musics of Control

Abstract

This paper traces how "control" is socially coded in contemporary music technology, and offers an account of the circuit of control to bridge the conceptual gap between the sociopolitical and the technical. The analysis redirects attention from the controllability of intelligent systems to the social formations through which control is allocated and recognized. To frame this shift, the paper theorizes the *gear economy*—a lens set alongside the much frequented concept gig economy in sociology—to explain how AI-music tools (e.g., Suno, Udio) are legitimated through existing music gear markets. The claim is coalition rather than addition: AI tools fold into pre-existing markets that price and credential controllability. Formally, the paper adopts a triptych that *deliberately echoes Deleuze's influential "Postscript" in title and cadence*: *Historical*, *Logic*, *Programming* to progress its analysis. Rather than constructing a new vocabulary of control in music technologies, this paper demonstrates that the parameters and regimes of control—technical, economic, and political—are themselves social indices. The aim is a design-oriented ethical intervention that speaks to technologists, musicians, and the general public, rendering these arrangements visible and reconfigurable and redirecting control toward humans so that AI music tools augment rather than shrink creative agency.

Keywords: gear economy, controllability, AI ethics

1. HISTORICAL

Grimes's Coachella 2024 breakdown made "control" visible as a public test with social stakes. Mid-set, a technical fault doubled the playback speed; the machine, rather than the musician, set the pace as she repeatedly restarted "Music 4 Machines" and shouted in frustration (McLaren, 2024). In her apology, she attributed the failure to delegated prep, noting she had "outsourced essential things like Rekordbox BPMs and letting someone else organize the tracks on the SD card etc.," and vowed to personally handle "critical tasks" going forward (Grimes, 2024). A year later, around the release of the new single "Artificial Angels" in October 2025, she clarified that only the intro/outro voice used AI and wrote that she was "opposed to AI music in some forms (Grimes, 2025)"on X, an oscillation that sits alongside her being vocal about AI—e.g., being recognized by TIME and calling it "magic" when accepting a TIME100 AI Impact award in 2025 (Shah, 2025), being listed in TIME100 AI in 2023 (its first edition) (TIME Editorial Staff, 2023), and inviting others to license a cloned "Grimes" voice via Elf.Tech with a 50% royalty split (Savage, 2023). In a single artist's arc, the on-stage audit of competence and the contract-level licensing of voice become two faces of how control in music technology is performed, allocated, and policed.

Control in music has thus migrated from a rhetoric of individual mastery to a regime of continuous modulation across files, clocks, metering, and dashboards that spans musician's training, studio recording, and on-stage performance (Théberge, 1997; Butler, 2014; Zagorski-Thomas, 2014). What counted as "skill" under studio or conservatory discipline—beatmatching by ear, score reading, session leadership—now relies on timing metadata, export settings, and live-recovery protocols whose failures are experienced as personal

collapse (Lhooq, 2017; Finlayson, 2025). Deleuze's account of the shift from Foucauldian "enclosed spaces of discipline" to "societies of control," as set out in his seminal "Postscript on the Societies of Control," is legible here in the musical case (Deleuze, 1992): authority is no longer housed in the room or rehearsal but in the networked configuration—devices, accounts, presets, and permissions and etc.—that sets what can be adjusted, how fast, and by whom. What appears as free action is already formatted by infrastructures that solicit, sort, and price behavior.

In musical labor, the scene of judgment has followed that migration. To "follow that migration" means judgment now runs through platforms and dashboards—again, devices, accounts, presets, permission and etc.—so the inequalities of wider "societies of control" permeate the "musics of control": tools may be technically accessible, but control still accrues to those with infrastructural access, training, and recognition. This suggests who holds and can exercise control in the music industry remains socially stratified, gendered, racialized, and institutionally gated. On gender, longitudinal festival data from female:pressure show women's representation in electronic lineups rising from 9.2% (2012) to roughly 30% (2023), with non-binary artists about 3.3%—progress that still leaves men a majority and the largest festivals least balanced (female:pressure Trouble Makers, 2024). In the studio, women producers remain under 10% across a twelve-year sample, with 2024 dipping to 5.9% after a 2023 high of 6.5%; Producer of the Year nominations were effectively closed to women across the same period (2.9% of nominations to women across 13 years) (USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2025).

Racialized global hierarchies compound these dynamics of gatekeeping control in the music tech industry. The UK Gen Z artist PinkPantheress has stated in a 2025 interview that audiences are less willing to listen to electronic music made by a Black woman (Catlin, 2025). Platform studies show that, on Global North platforms such as Spotify, non-Western music is often relegated to the margins (Hodgson, 2021). In machine-learning training pipelines, studies report that roughly 86% of total dataset hours and over 93% of researchers focus primarily on Global North music; although about 40% of datasets include some non-Western content, genres from the Global South account for only 14.6% of the data (Mehta et al., 2024). Ethnographic scholarship likewise shows the dominance of Global North technical standards: in Nairobi, recording infrastructures and platformization shape rights, recognition, and revenue (Eisenberg, 2015, 2025); in Cairo, streaming-era "imperial lag" compels professionals in the Global South to recalibrate to benchmarks set elsewhere (e.g., routing stems to Global North studios for mixing) (Sprengel, 2023). These dynamics mirror what Noble (2018) calls the replication of algorithmic oppression within algorithmic infrastructures (Noble, 2018). Taken together, these evidences indicate that the public staging of "technical control," the backstage authorship of sessions, and the imbalanced datasets that underwrite future human-made or generative AI music in the next wave of distribution remain stratified by gendered and racial hierarchies, shaping who is seen—and credited—as the bearer of control.

Therefore, this paper insists that any inquiry into controllability in emerging music technologies must also ask who gets to exercise control, and on what terms. An account that ends at the interface or the algorithm remains evasive. These questions are longstanding in decolonial and feminist STS, yet they remain underdeveloped in design and engineering practice if the aim is equitable and genuinely accessible music technologies. This is the

bridge to the next section: the gear economy, which grounds the human–machine analogy in a concrete analysis of how control is allocated, priced, and recognized—before which the analysis briefly establishes a theoretical and genealogical frame from feminist STS to show how inequalities in societies of control structure contemporary human–machine relations.

Scholarship on AI ethics grounded in feminist STS offers a way to program for control that is social as well as technical, in music and in AI more broadly. The aim here is not to exhaust the field but to mobilize its core insights on equitable technology, since machine infrastructures reorganize the axes along which control is won and lost. The seminal yet controvercial Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto (Haraway, 1991), long canonized in feminist STS, dismantles the organizing binaries—human/machine, nature/culture, male/female—of what she calls the informatics of domination. The cyborg is not a metaphor of fusion but a diagnostic of boundary breakdown, showing that "control" is neither a stable human possession nor a clean machine attribute; it is accomplished through networks of coupling, standards, and protocols that make subjects and objects co-constitutive rather than opposed (Haraway, 1991). Suchman, in parallel, contests the designer's binaries of user/tool, plan/action, and human/machine, arguing that what appears as autonomous control is a situated accomplishment: coordination across people, artifacts, and environments rather than execution of a pre-given plan (Suchman, 2007). Technofeminist accounts generalize this point to contemporary sociotechnical systems: where binaries are reinstated, hierarchy returns under the guise of neutrality (Wajcman, 2004). Together these positions replace sovereign possession with relational articulation: control is distributed, negotiated, and locally achieved, and systems that ignore this reproduce inequality by design. They also prepare the analysis of the gear economy in Section 2, where gear assumes a quasi-subject status—valued, credentialed, and delegated agency—so that control appears not as a property of tools, but as a marketized relation binding humans and machines.

If Grimes' Coachella set of "losing control" condensed the drama, then the subsequent discourse at the beginning of this section—about delegation, AI voice licensing, and oscillating "opposition" to AI—charts the field in miniature: control is not a property of an individual, but a relationship between systems, contracts, and audiences. The lesson is not to moralize failure or fetishize mastery, but to recognize and contest the arrangements by which control is allocated. That is the ground on which the next section will analyze the logic of control through the proposition of the gear economy and propose an alternative programming in the third section: systems that return actionable, legible, and reversible control to the creator.

2. LOGIC

A pricing slider tells the story. In October 2025, Teenage Engineering launched a "pick-your-own-price" experiment for the OP-XY: a web slider starting at USD 1,699 and extending to USD 9,999, framed as a public inquiry into value, with the original list price set at USD 2,299 (Mullen, 2025; Teenage Engineering, 2025). The OP-XY—produced by one of the most visible brands in the music-gear market—functions as a high-level point of entry that nevertheless imposes a steep learning curve; YouTube tutorials made by musicians routinely astonish lay viewers newly encountering music hardware. The wider world of gear is intricate and internally differentiated, spanning synthesizers, grooveboxes, drum machines, samplers,

sequencers, and effects units, and more broadly instruments in a traditional sense, with some devices blending functions and others designed for singular purposes. These instruments constitute core infrastructures not only for the performance and creative processes of electronic musicians—indeed, the very category of electronic music emerges from advances in synthesizers and modular systems—but also for the music industry at large, where studios are built upon hardware that sustains sound and recording quality.

This paper proposes the term "gear economy," in parallel with the well-established concept of the "gig economy." The coinage draws from music technology—particularly the installations and devices that scaffold creative labor—but it also recognizes that every artistic field has its material armature: garments and needles in fashion, specialized brushes in painting, and so on. Music, however, has elevated this relation: gear companies actively shape a culture of "gear fetish," widely recognized among musicians and epitomized by gear acquisition syndrome (GAS) (Bates and Bennett, 2022; Herbst and Menze, 2021). In the same way that the gig economy organizes labor under conditions of precarity and platform governance (Srnicek, 2017; Stefano, 2016; Vallas and Schor, 2020; Cloonan and Williamson, 2023), the gear economy prices and legitimates controllability through hardware, plug-ins, and now model access—credentialing technical display while distributing barriers to entry.

Just as sociological scholarship turns to the gig economy to apprehend how labor proceeds under conditions of precarity, the gear economy—which sustains certain gig workers, here taking musicians as the analytic focus—rests upon a technological substrate. It operates under a recognizably modernist calculus: the more complex the machine a human can "control," the higher its price; or, put differently, the more it is seen to index intellectual refinement—and the harder the learning curve required to demonstrate competence—the more "valuable" the machine becomes. Crucially, this valuation is not merely descriptive but performative: price and perceived controllability co-constitute a credential that substitutes, in part, for institutional accreditation.

In platformed music markets where visibility is contingent on legible signals of expertise, acquiring gear with steep learning curves functions as a form of symbolic capital and a proof-of-work that communicates technical authorship to bookers, collaborators, and algorithmically sorted audiences alike. From this follows a distinctive purchasing logic for musicians as gig workers. Under budget constraints and income volatility, DIY musicians undertake targeted capital expenditure on devices that promise a high "control-to-price" ratio, even when this entails sunk learning costs or lock-in to particular ecosystems. YouTube's profusion of comparative gear reviews mediates these choices by translating abstract properties of gears into practical affordances within a home-studio environment—often a laptop augmented by a minimal chain (Bell, 2014). This DIY infrastructure, in turn, feeds back into valuation: performances and short-form videos that foreground modular rigs, sequencers, or live looping amplify circulation precisely by exhibiting controllability as technique (Woods, 2023). In effect, what is bought is not just a device but a structured set of possibilities, an investment pathway for converting limited time and attention into skills that audiences can see, thereby improving mobility in markets where virality and bookings depend on demonstrable control.

The gear economy, then, sustains creators insofar as it enables them to feel in control of their work and technique. From a logical and theoretical deduction of how technical control operates, this paper advances two core claims:

1) Musicians make sense of their agency, technicality, and ability through control(lability): consider DJ skills, or the control demanded by electronic music in knob-turning and mastering, or put simply, the mastery of gears, a practice that is at once somatic and cognitive.

2) AI, likewise, proves its usability through control(lability): every detail, every scale, every note, every timbre is conditioned by massive datasets created by human beings—yet is it, in the end, for human's sake?

If high-end, hard-to-learn gear like the OP-XY reads as expert-exclusive, contemporary AI song generators are often framed as the opposite: frictionless tools that remove musical-knowledge barriers. While much commentary judges the results musically inadequate—The Verge's review of Suno V5 called it "technically impressive, but still soulless," with vocals "too close to perfection to be believably human" (O'Brien, 2025)—genre critics likewise argue that waves of "AI city pop" dilute the style's grammar, producing pastiche without feel or historical situatedness (Press-Reynolds, 2025). User reports also flag controllability gaps: even as Suno advertises more granular post-generation editing, black-box boundaries around stems, seeds, and element-level revision persist, with community feedback describing current stem splits as artifact-prone and "not ready" for many uses (u/peabody624 and r/SunoAI, 2024; u/Longjumping_Thing723 and r/SunoAI, 2025; u/RevolutionaryDiet602 and r/SunoAI, 2025). Technically, these critiques align with findings of an interpretation gap between text prompts and musical outcomes, and ongoing difficulty controlling structure, harmony, and performance parameters in text-to-music systems (Zang and Zhang, 2024; Melechovsky et al., 2024).

However, at the same time, recent listener studies show that people can struggle to tell AI music from human-made tracks in blind, Turing-like tests—especially when pairs are similar—complicating simple quality judgments (Figueiredo et al., 2025). Given that AI music is increasingly indiscernible, the point is not to condemn its use as good or bad or mature or not, because "soulfulness" or "humanness" can be treated as a tweakable design parameter; rather, it should be understood, much like DAWs and gear, as a technique that will join the music production process and should expand human-in-the-loop agency.

A fixed view of the gear economy—assuming traditional gear assemblages uniquely confer creative agency and are categorically superior to AI—can set up a false "human-plus-gear versus AI" dichotomy and, in parallel, fuels an automation cult around prompt-based systems, the logic of which may elevate a "no human in the loop" ideal that ultimately cuts people out of music-making. However, this paper contends that AI tools and emerging technologies for music increasingly resemble traditional gear: their parameters become ever more addressable to human users. Just as hardware often becomes virtualized—think of the Juno lineage of the last century, or the modular systems now readily available in software form like virtual synths and VCV racks—so, too, do generative AI tools in music represent a preliminary instantiation of this tendency. The issue is not a simple virtual/physical dichotomy, nor merely the compaction of functions into keyboard shortcuts. Rather, it concerns how one gains access—through which shortcuts, to which tools, with what parameters. This remains on the human side. The more precise the intervention, the more we reach a domain that AI, as such, cannot meaningfully author; here the human secures artistic agency. When an artist must account for a chosen timbre, line, or metaphor, outsourcing authorship to AI turns perverse: control cedes to a soulless AI front person(a).

Within this frame, the gear economy names a contemporary market in which controllability is priced and legitimated across hardware, plug-ins, model access, quotas, and terms of service that underwrite current AI-music business models. It is therefore unsurprising that Suno Studio followed the initial prompt-to-song service: it adopts a human-in-the-loop logic, in contrast to single-step generation, and lends users more "control." In this configuration, control mediates technological claims to usability. The more open affordances permit prompt-based modification of specific tracks or melodies, suggesting a measure of black-box translucency. By contrast, the earlier whole-track regime—without precise element-level tweaks—reflected the constraints of pretraining. The subsequent layering of accountability and modifiability signals an advance in algorithmic capacity; with it, the system becomes more controllable and therefore more "useful."

Accordingly, this section contends that emerging AI tools in music are not extrinsic to the future of music-making; they are converging toward greater spaces of human modification and, in doing so, are forming a coalition with existing gear markets in which control is packaged and sold. The upshot is historical continuity under new governors: what the conservatory once achieved through discipline, the platform now enacts through dashboards and licensing menus; what the studio once guarded through gatekeeping, the subscription plan now stratifies through tiers. The hierarchies we register on stage and in credits are the audible traces of these arrangements.

3. PROGRAMMING

Programming names the passage from modulation to design. Deleuze describes the move from disciplinary enclosures to societies of control as a shift from bounded rooms to continuous modulation (Deleuze, 1992)—a term that, not coincidentally, circulates in electronic music and, in contemporary machine learning. At the interface level of music production, this modulation arrived as Logic—not only the title and argument of Section 2 but the digital audio workstation itself (Logic Pro)—where sequencing, MIDI "programming," and automation lanes render control as a timeline of parameters rather than a fixed rulebook. "Programming," then, is not merely coding; it is the normative act of (re)wiring interfaces, infrastructures, and institutions so that control becomes exposed, stable, and redistributable. It is also (re)writing the sociotechnical rules by which humans and machines share work, authorship, and risk.

What is good programming for AI tools in music, then? Section 1 has established that control is socially allocated; Section 2 has shown that markets price controllability. The task now is to design access without paternalism. First, from a sociopolitical perspective, while there is broad agreement that contemporary AI systems are programmable, the salient question is whether they admit social programmability. Who builds these systems? What are the gender ratios and DEI commitments of the companies involved? What data infrastructures underwrite the models? As the machine-learning audits in Section 1 demonstrate, regional and cultural skews are disproportionately encoded into datasets—an imbalance that is itself programmable. The goal is to ensure that communities using these systems are not tethered to masculinized, racialized, or Global-North musical dialects.

Second, from sociotechnical perspective, AI tools should be designed for accessibility rather than sliding into the gear economy's logic where price indexes novelty or flamboyant

features: "musical novices" should be able to apprehend sound, and the machine should be sufficiently intelligible to invite modification. The YouTube essay "I'm Done w/ Gear Review Videos, (Jordan, 2023)" which voices fatigue with "geartube" and gear-cult dynamics, prefigures a similar trajectory for AI music tools as users take sides among competing systems. To avoid reproducing for-profit logics that sideline creativity and access, this paper calls for an AI-ethics–informed programmability checklist for designers across systems; its full specification is left to future work due to space constraints here, but the need is urgent. The aim for the call again, as iterated in this paper, is to recast seemingly "new" AI musical inventions as coalitions rather than additions—an analytic move intended to forestall foreseeable harms or at least render them legible.

Ultimately, a creativity-supporting AI tool should not leave generative possibilities suspended in the abstract. The machine must expose musically meaningful levers rather than hiding choices inside presets, and DIY participation should be welcomed rather than policed. It should function as a toolkit comprehensible even to those with limited or no musical background—rather than mirroring the current gear economy, where price indexes the intelligibility engineered into devices. Existing interactive music production software like SOMAX 2, Max/MSP, and live-coding languages erect thresholds and, as extensions of (or in coalition with, as this paper suggests) the gear economy, remain technically unfriendly to the public. Platforms like Suno or Udio do offer alternative points of entry, yet in notable respects they replicate the long-standing business logics of the for-profit platform economy in line with the music industry. Meanwhile, the functionality that is—or could be—controllable and accessible remains opaque; people without musical training often do not know what they can do—unknown unknowns prevail as "we don't know what we don't know".

Therefore, future expanded AI tools' interfaces should work towards rendering the full range of tweakable parameters directly modifiable and immediately understandable: terms including tempo, meter, key, harmonic function, voicing, timbre, dynamics, and arrangement, should be conducted in plain, non-gatekept language rather than expert-only jargon. They should resist the reflex to reproduce conventional DAW grammars in which professionalization monopolizes the language of access. The point is not to chase feature parity for conferences or journals but to ensure that users know what can be adjusted and to name each parameter in laymen-friendly plain terms. The principle is simple yet exacting: lower the cost of entry while keeping the path open toward deeper craft. Access to this process—the accessibility and modifiability acknowledged by AI and emergent musical technologies—indexes the degree of control afforded to the human modulator.

In conclusion, this paper demystifies "control/controllability" in music technology and redirects attention to how emerging AI tools in music can open control to those marginalized by social stratification and musical gatekeeping, but also risk entrenching prior regimes if programmed by the wrong hands and in the wrong way. It traces how control is socially embedded in Section 1, and how access to musical knowledge and industry exposure is unevenly distributed. As analyzed in Section 2, gear can help those without studio-grade resources begin from chill, or serve as a creative complement that showcases control and technique, yet it also prices controllability in ways that AI tools may replicate. The gear economy therefore names both the prototypical form of software and a precursor to today's generative AI tools. Generative systems are not wholly novel; in places they hinder practice

by making key elements non-tweakable—and when tweakability arrives, firms often monetize it. Future studies should further examine the legal and institutional frameworks that redefine creativity in an era of AI-mediated controllability, bridging the technological and the social to ensure that human-in-the-loop agency is reflected in authorship, credit, and rights. They should also map practical pathways for AI-mediated works to move through industry distribution with minimal friction while preserving accountability and artistic intent. From an ethical standpoint, the paper therefore argues for programming a more just control circuit—one that is not driven by for-profit logic but wires creativity into machines and, reciprocally, lets machine affordances return to human authorship in transparent, revisable ways.

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