

# **Can Music Production Education Be a Meaningful Instrument for Development?**

## **A Case Study Analysis in the Favelas of São Paulo**

Assessment presented in partial fulfilment of the MAS in International Relations of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

Candidate name: Julien Fehlmann

Supervisor: Prof. Davide Rodogno

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, who are going through uniquely challenging times, as well as to my extended family, friends, and acquaintances, who have been incredibly supportive.

# Abstract

In recent decades, music projects for social change have multiplied, ranging from individual initiatives to orchestral training. Leading the movement are music schools with a social mission, which most often mobilise classical music education to support underserved communities. Meanwhile, the world has shifted towards digital technologies, and the music industry has become image-driven with the influence of social media and smartphones. Unfortunately, the failure of most classical music schools to integrate the music production skills essential in today's technology-driven industry costs students many opportunities and smoother entry into the job market.

This professional thesis examined whether music production education could meaningfully contribute to development by investigating its current provision, identifying gaps between curricula and professional demands, and assessing institutional and student perceptions. Its qualitative mixed methods comprised a case study about a 10-day music production pilot programme implemented in the largest favela of São Paulo as part of my work for the NGO IRMA ([www.irma.ac](http://www.irma.ac)), two semi-structured interviews with staff from music schools with a social mission located in São Paulo, and a survey of classical music schools across Latin America to uncover whether the São Paulo findings could resonate more broadly.

This research concludes that music production education can yield important returns at the individual, institutional, and community levels in economic, social, and cultural terms. First and foremost, music production education enhances the quality of music education. Further, musicians can gain professional confidence, employability, and business skills, while collective benefits encompass enhanced school visibility, cultural preservation, and community development. Yet, structural barriers prevent institutions from embracing (more) music production. Those include a lack of finances, in-house know-how, and time. As the case study showed, these obstacles can be overcome through freely accessible technology, partnerships, and donor advocacy.

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# Executive Summary

## Background

In recent decades, music projects for social change have multiplied, ranging from individual initiatives to orchestral training (Hesser & Bartleet, 2020; Sloboda et al., 2020). Leading the movement are music schools with a social mission (MSSM), which mobilise music education (most often classical music) to support underserved communities. The most famous model, El Sistema has been replicated in 70+ countries, serving millions of students (El Sistema, 2018).

Among other issues regarding music education for social change (See first and foremost: Baker, 2014, 2025; Sloboda et al., 2020), many music education institutions have missed the technological turn of the 21st century (e.g. Kansichi, 2024 in the USA). This hampers the “professional viability” of musicians (Gilbert & Salazar, 2025, p. 107), leading individuals, schools, and communities to miss out on potential economic, social, and cultural benefits.

## Thesis Statement

This thesis finds that training in music production improves the quality of music education. Compounded with the long-proven development potential of the creative industries, of which music is a part and where music production skills act as a multiplier, music schools can bolster economic growth, community regeneration, and integration in the global knowledge economy. Yet, in Latin America, most (classical) music schools, whether with a social mission or not (MS(SM)), do not include music production in their mandatory curricula. Reasons for this include lack of funding, in-house knowledge, and donor awareness. This thesis advocates for the uptake of music production in curricula, eventually through partnerships or using freely accessible resources and software, as well as campaigning towards donor awareness-raising.

## Methodology

This thesis’ methodology was based on qualitative mixed methods. It involved a literature review on music, politics, social change, development, and new technologies. The primary data stemmed from a case study about a music production project in São Paulo that I implemented as part of my work for the NGO IRMA ([www.irma.ac](http://www.irma.ac)), a survey on MS(SM) sentiment about music production across Latin America, and two semi-structured interviews with MSSM staff. The study was conducted part-time over nine months.

## Findings

This thesis identifies two key benefits of including music production in music education, as well as its current absence from MS(SM)'s mandatory curricula:

- Music production education enhances the quality of music education. Past projects show that it can yield returns in economic, social, and cultural terms. For musicians, those include increased professional confidence, employability, and business skills. Collective benefits encompass enhanced school visibility, preservation of local culture, and community development.
- Music production skills open musicians' perspectives in the wider creative industries, a sector long identified as a driver of development. Such capacities enable artists to take part in today's tech-driven world and shape the narrative about their community.
- Despite this, music production education has yet to be integrated into MS(SM)'s regular curricula, as only a fraction of the institutions surveyed run such subjects as options. The reasons for this include lack of funding, in-house knowledge, and donor awareness.

## Recommendations

To overcome the structural barriers that prevent MS(SM) to integrate music production in their curricula, this thesis advocates in favour of the following measures:

- The lack of finances can be overcome thanks to freely accessible technology. The project in São Paulo, which formed the case study for this thesis, is a case in point. Based on free software, online resources, and running on mobile phones, it opened access to music production training at no cost for the students and the partner school.
- MS(SM) lacking in-house knowledge in technology could develop partnerships with professionals and institutions to reduce their cost of entry in that field. All MS(SM) should (continue to) build their capabilities in an area poised to evolve ever faster.
- MS(SM) should persuade donors of the benefits and necessity of music production in today's industry, including for classical musicians. Music production is not merely a technical task to be delegated to contractors. It has become an integral part of being an artist and is performed as often as music itself. With AI looming on financial returns, musicians must become tech-savvy to be able to use technology to their advantage.