



Perceptions of Fairness in Music Streaming: Listening to Streaming Users

Insights from Work Package 4 of the Fair MusE Project (D4.2)

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In an age where digital platforms dominate how we discover and consume music, the question of fairness is more relevant than ever. Through Work Package 4 of the Fair MusE project, researchers turned to the listeners themselves, those navigating the algorithmic playlists, curated suggestions, and data-driven recommendations, for answers. Their voices reveal a nuanced and often critical view of music streaming: one where fairness is subjective, economic, emotional, and deeply shaped by platform design. From algorithmic manipulation to social lock-in, their testimonies offer a candid snapshot of how it feels to participate in today's digital music ecosystem, and what still needs to change.

What does fairness mean in the world of music streaming? This deceptively simple question reveals a rich and multifaceted set of responses when posed to actual users of streaming platforms. In the context of the **Fair MusE** project—an interdisciplinary initiative that investigates fairness in the music ecosystem from legal, economic, and algorithmic perspectives—Work Package 4 (WP4) takes a unique approach. It places music consumers at the center of the conversation, inviting them to share their experiences, opinions, and data.

At the heart of WP4's methodology lies a combination of streaming history donations and in-depth interviews with 36 users from across Europe. These qualitative insights illuminate how people navigate digital music platforms and how they interpret the fairness—or unfairness—of the systems that mediate their listening. The findings challenge dominant narratives of platform neutrality and digital abundance, instead offering a nuanced portrait of users as thoughtful, critical, and often ambivalent participants in today's music economy.

Fairness as Subjective and Social

What emerges most clearly from the interviews is that fairness is not a fixed or easily defined concept. For many participants, fairness is both subjective and socially constructed—rooted as much in personal feeling as in broader norms. As one respondent put it:

“For something to be fair it has to be both related to how you experience it but also how society perceives it as being fair (...) I also think it's difficult to have any final truth about what is fair, because it is a subjective experience that is a part of identifying what is fair.” (Respondent #36)

This idea of fairness as fluid and contextual contrasts with more institutional or legal definitions, underlining a central tension: between users' lived experiences and the systemic design of



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platforms. Users, it seems, do not passively accept the structures around them; they interpret and judge them through a personal lens.

Economic Realities and the Fairness of Rewards

For others, fairness is rooted more directly in economic terms—particularly visibility, discoverability, and remuneration. One participant noted:

“Fairness is about equal remuneration or recommendation... about having a level playing field.”
(Respondent #7)

Another respondent offered a vivid metaphor:

“If we picture this business as a cake, I think fairness would be: ‘The one who makes the cake would get the biggest part of the actual cake.’” (Respondent #8)

These perspectives point to concerns about how value is distributed in the music ecosystem, highlighting a widespread feeling that current systems reward the wrong players—platforms over artists, major labels over independents, and popularity over diversity.

Passive Users in a Powerful System

Despite their critical reflections, many users described a feeling of detachment or powerlessness. They saw themselves as passive participants in a system they could not influence. Several noted that the structures of music streaming replicate or even amplify broader societal inequalities. Issues such as profit concentration, opaque recommendation systems, and the dominance of major players often left users feeling sidelined.

This sense of exclusion does not suggest indifference, but rather an acute awareness of how deeply embedded and commercially driven these systems are. Users do not just consume content—they reflect on their lack of control over the platforms that shape their listening habits.

The Cost of Leaving: Social Lock-in

A particularly striking insight from the interviews was the concept of **social lock-in**. Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their chosen platforms but felt unable to switch due to the loss it would entail—not just of playlists and preferences, but of social networks and shared experiences.

As the WP4 report observes:

“Music is offered by many providers, but a user's social network is locked to one specific service provider.”

Although Article 20 of the GDPR grants users the right to data portability, this legal right does not extend to the community features embedded within platforms—friend lists, shared playlists, collaborative listening. As a result, switching services is not simply a technical inconvenience; it is a social and emotional rupture. Without broader, enforceable portability, platforms face little pressure to improve fairness or user welfare.



Algorithmic Opaqueness and the Question of Influence

Concerns about algorithmic opacity featured prominently in users' accounts. Many described a feeling of being steered—or even manipulated—by recommendation systems they did not understand.

“There are some times that I think that the algorithm is trying to force me to listen to something... I felt like they are really trying to get me... forcing me to listen to this.” (Respondent #9)

These sentiments were often tied to suspicion that economic incentives—akin to the old practice of *payola*—drive recommendations.

“When new music is promoted, usually you hear a lot of the same artists... they put more money into it, so they get promoted more... the smaller artists... they won't get promoted... and I think that would be unfair.” (Respondent #1)

In response, several participants advocated for greater transparency: platforms should label paid promotions, differentiate organic recommendations, and disclose when and how money influences visibility.

Abundance Without Access?

Paradoxically, the vast musical libraries made available by streaming platforms were sometimes seen as barriers rather than benefits. While the abundance of content is often framed as a form of democratization, several users challenged this view. One respondent, who identified as both an artist and a listener, put it bluntly:

“Streaming services are actually just contributing to making the music industry more unequal... it's a little bit of a fallacy that because of the internet everybody can be discovered... What streaming seems to me has done, really, is they brought back Payola.” (Respondent #6)

This comment captures a wider frustration: that digital openness has not translated into equal opportunity. Instead, it has created new gatekeepers—opaque algorithms and monetized platforms—whose criteria for visibility remain obscure and often exclusionary.

Towards a Fuller Understanding of Fairness

The insights collected in WP4 complicate simplistic notions of fairness as a matter of code, contracts, or copyright. For users, fairness is a lived experience—shaped by how they engage with algorithms, navigate commercial systems, and negotiate the social dimensions of streaming culture.

As **Fair MusE** moves forward, these user perspectives will be essential. They remind us that fairness cannot be engineered solely from above. It must also be understood from the ground up: in the everyday experiences of those who listen, reflect, and—sometimes—resist.

