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# Ethical and Creative Implications of Backing Track Utilization by Musicians in Live Stage Performances

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## *Abstract*

The integration of technology in music has emerged as a critical component in the creation, production, and presentation of live performances. Among the increasingly prevalent technologies is the backing track or sequencer, which enables musicians to incorporate pre-recorded musical elements into their live performances. However, the utilization of this technology introduces ethical dilemmas concerning authenticity and transparency within the realm of live performances. This study examines the ethical and creative implications associated with the use of backing tracks by musicians in the context of live performance. The findings suggest that the employment of backing tracks can be deemed ethical if executed with transparency while preserving the essence of liveness in the performing arts. Furthermore, this technology provides opportunities for musicians to enhance their creative expression; however, it also presents a risk of undermining the authenticity of the performance. By achieving a balance between artistry, technological utilization, and audience expectations, musicians can cultivate a performance experience that is both creative and ethically sound.

***Keywords:*** *Backing Tracks; Creativity, Ethics; Live Performances; Music Technology*

## *Introduction*

In this modern era, human dependence on technology has become increasingly pronounced across nearly all aspects of life. Technology encompasses tools, techniques, and organized systems of interaction designed to achieve human objectives. It is not merely a tool but also a human activity aimed at attaining desired outcomes, including knowledge, beliefs, and associated goals (Ingadóttir & Jonsdottir, 2006). The utilization of computer-related technology in the workplace is expanding and has become an indispensable necessity (Shu et al., 2011). The rapid advancement of technology renders it increasingly difficult to envision life without digital devices and automated systems that enhance efficiency and convenience. Technology plays a pivotal role in shaping how individuals think and act within society, thereby facilitating the transition from one technological era to the next (McLuhan, 1994, in Surahman, 2016).

Technology has arguably become essential in the creation, production, expression, distribution, promotion, and consumption of music (Hugill, 2012, dalam Waddell & Williamon, 2019). In the field of music, technology encompasses a wide range of hardware devices, but most modern music technology revolves around computers (Hosken, 2011). The music industry underwent a digital revolution when fully

equipped recording studio facilities became accessible in the form of software (Tanev & Božinovski, 2013). This includes virtual musical instruments, which allow users to produce sounds resembling real instruments or even create entirely new, fully digital sounds. This technology enables musicians to transcend the physical limitations of traditional instruments and explore new sonic possibilities (Widodo & Kasiyan, 2024). Music consumption has also shifted from analog to digital formats. Digital music formats and services such as Napster and iTunes revolutionized the music industry by challenging traditional business models and copyright norms while offering unprecedented convenience and accessibility (Guo, 2023).

In addition, advancements in technology have also revolutionized the way musicians present their music live on stage. One concrete example is the increasing popularity of using backing tracks or sequencers in live performances. The development of technology in music production allows for sounds or musical performances that are difficult to reproduce live, prompting many bands to incorporate audio recordings or backing tracks into their shows (Robertson & Plumbley, 2013).Technological advancements in music production enable musicians to create more complex and dynamic sounds through the use of sequencers (Hendrawan, 2024). Gareth Fuller, the conductor of Northants Sings Out, a finalist in Britain's Got Talent 2024, stated that the use of backing tracks for live performances is becoming increasingly common (Radnedge, 2024). Musicians use backing tracks or sequencers to add additional recorded sounds, such as background vocals or instruments, which are difficult or expensive to perform live, or to make their performance sound similar to the recorded version (Anang et al., 2021).

Based on the explanation above, it can be understood that backing tracks or sequencers are audio recordings used to support musicians' performances on stage, whether as additional musical arrangements, vocal harmonies, or other elements that may be difficult to present live. This is especially true for musicians who do not have enough members or instruments to create a complete arrangement live. Examples of international bands that use backing tracks include Muse and Coldplay. As stated in a news article in The Independent, “Muse and Coldplay are believed to use playback systems to reproduce their recordings’ swelling strings” (Sherwin, 2013).

Another example of the use of backing tracks in live performances is the band Juicy Luicy during their performance at Sampoerna Fest 2024. At that time, Juicy Luicy's lineup consisted only of drums, bass, guitar, keyboards, and vocals. However, the music they presented was rich and musically complex because there were string and brass sections that were not physically present on stage. These additional sounds came from backing tracks or sequencers. Similarly, in church music, musicians use backing tracks to support the desired atmosphere of praise and worship (Anang et al., 2021). Church musicians also use sequencers as additional layers, tempo references, and cues for song sections (Sonjani & Harwanto, 2022).

However, on the other hand, important ethical questions arise when musicians begin to rely excessively on backing tracks, or when backing tracks take a more dominant role in their performances. This was exemplified by the band Falling in Reverse, as reported in a news article by Loudwire, which stated that they canceled their performance at WIIL Rock Fest 2022, because the laptop used for the backing track was lost (Trapp, 2022). This incident demonstrates the band’s dependence on backing track technology. While this technology has enabled musicians to create more complex and engaging performances, it can also blur the audience’s perceptions between pure live performances and those assisted by technology (Baxter-Moore & Kitts, 2016). In fact, some argue that using backing tracks is a form of deception towards the audience, as reported by The Independent, “bands who rely on secret backing tapes when they play live are “conning” fans, a rising musician has claimed” (Sherwin, 2013).

It seems that the use of backing tracks has become common in the world of music performances. However, the question that arises is: what are the ethical boundaries of using backing tracks in live

performances in general? Can the use of backing tracks be considered a legitimate form of creativity in the context of modern art, or does it compromise the essence of authentic live music performances?

## *Methods*

This study adopts a literature review approach to explore ethical and creative issues related to the use of backing tracks in live music performances. This method allows flexibility in selecting and analyzing relevant sources, such as scholarly articles, reports, and digital content. By combining multiple perspectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive view of the topic, including the application of backing track technology and its impact on audience experience and the authenticity of live performances. The data for this research are drawn from a wide range of documents and archived materials focusing on music technology, performance ethics, and the dynamics of live art in the modern era. By examining emerging trends in social and cultural discourse, this study seeks to explain how backing tracks create opportunities for artistic innovation while also raising ethical challenges in live performance art. This research does not rely on field data collection. However, it places significant emphasis on maintaining integrity in the selection and use of sources. All literature and materials referenced are obtained legally and utilized in accordance with academic and ethical research standards.

## *Result and Discussions*

### Backing Track or Sequencer in Live Performance

Before exploring backing tracks or sequencers in more detail, it is important to first question: what is live performance? What distinguishes a live performance from other forms of music presentation? Physical presence, direct interaction, and a collective atmosphere are the key elements that differentiate the experience of a live performance from listening to a recording (Kleive-Andersen, 2024). Audiences are willing to pay to attend live performances because they expect social connections with others and the opportunity to engage directly with the performers in the same physical space in real-time (Swarbrick et al., 2019). The direct communication between musicians and the audience is part of what makes the live experience different from studio productions. In live performances, the energy that arises from this direct interaction creates a unique atmosphere that cannot be reproduced by recordings. Live performances also contain an element of risk that fosters spontaneity and a unique experience. This element, despite its risks, becomes a major attraction because it makes the performance feel more "alive" and authentic (Kleive-Andersen, 2024). This sense of liveness is what audiences often seek as a distinguishing factor from recordings and is one reason they are willing to pay to see a live performance by their favorite musicians.

However, audience expectations go beyond just “liveness.” Audiences look forward to popular songs from the musicians they are watching, and these songs are certainly produced in the studio. It is a given that, in contemporary music production, there is an audio manipulation process to achieve modern and complex sound quality. Therefore, when preparing music for live performances, artists will deconstruct the sound elements from studio recordings to determine which are important and relevant, and then reconstruct them to fit the needs of the stage (Kjus & Danielsen, 2016). In other words, musicians apply studio recording technology to the stage. This has become possible because the boundary between studio technology and stage performance has blurred since the rapid development of MIDI connectivity technology in the 1980s (Knowles & Hewitt, 2011). At that time, a drummer on stage could trigger the same drum sounds as those in the recording. This means that audiences have become accustomed to hearing drum sounds that are precisely accurate, just like in the recordings.

With all these possibilities, musicians can bring the complexity of studio-produced music into live performances on stage. This is where the role of backing tracks becomes essential. A backing track is additional music played using a laptop or other playback devices to complement the instruments present

on stage. In live performances, backing tracks are audio recordings that typically contain specific musical elements, such as additional instruments, background vocals, sound effects, or other elements that are difficult for musicians to play live during the performance. Kjus & Danielsen further explain that the equipment used to play these sound elements or backing tracks includes a laptop with sequencing software and various audio effect plugins.

The utilization of backing tracks allows musicians or bands to present a richer and more complex sound, approaching the quality of studio production. For example, in a live performance, a soloist may use a backing track to showcase instruments that cannot be played alone, or a band may use a backing track to include orchestral parts or electronic effects. However, many musicians incorporate all musical components into the backing track, leading to an interchangeable relationship between the role of the musicians on stage and that of the backing track.

## Ethical Boundaries of Backing Track Usage in Live Performances

Ethics and technology are inseparable, as ethics guide humans in the proper use of technology (Ramadhan et al., 2024). Ethics is a normative field of study because it plays a role in determining what should or should not be done by an individual (Hasoloan, 2018). According to John Dewey (in Bresnahan, 2014), art, in this case music performance, elevates human experience to a higher level alongside ethics that aim to direct that experience towards goodness and wisdom. It is impossible for a musician or a band to be prohibited from using backing tracks or sequencers as technological aids during a music performance. However, there seem to be certain ethical limits regarding how far this technology can be utilized. Most artists and bands use backing tracks to support their performances, but when does the use of backing tracks cross ethical boundaries?

Two popular branches of ethics are deontology and teleology. Deontology, according to Immanuel Kant, emphasizes the duty to act without considering the consequences (Dahlan, 2009). Deontology judges the rightness or wrongness of an action based on the underlying rules, regardless of the goodness or badness of the resulting consequences. Simply put, in deontological principles, lying is considered wrong even if it may lead to good outcomes or even save someone's life. This principle stands in contrast to teleology, which focuses on the purpose or final outcome of an action. In this theory, an action is deemed right if it produces positive or good consequences (Joyo, 2021). In the case of lying, teleology would still justify the action if it results in a beneficial impact.

### The Utilization of Backing Tracks from a Deontological Ethics Perspective

Prior to the advent of recording technology, music was always presented live. However, with advancements in technology, concerts have gained increased significance as a means for musicians to physically connect with their audiences, as individuals more frequently engage with digital music without direct interaction with the musicians (Baym, 2018). In other words, the concept of live music exists in contrast to the emergence of recording technology (Kjus & Danielsen, 2016). Over time, various new opportunities in recording have been discovered alongside the development of diverse tools and techniques for editing and manipulating sound (Brøvig-Hanssen, 2013). This has created a distinctly contrasting musical experience between attending live performances and listening to recordings.

Audiences require effort to attend a musician's performance by fulfilling obligations such as purchasing tickets or adhering to similar requirements. Therefore, musicians also have a responsibility to provide something that justifies the effort made by the audience. Based on this perspective, it can be concluded that concerts and digital music are distinct from each other. Audiences attend a music performance not to listen to MP3 audio files, but to experience the liveness of the musicians in a more tangible way. Thus, indirectly, musicians have a moral obligation to offer an authentic, live musical experience, rather than simply bringing studio recordings onto the stage.

From a deontological perspective, actions are evaluated based on the inherent moral principles of the actions themselves, rather than solely on the consequences they produce. Therefore, the use of backing tracks in live performances is assessed by considering whether the action adheres to certain ethical principles, such as honesty, transparency, and respect for the values of the performing arts. The use of backing tracks without transparency to the audience can be considered deceptive, as the audience has the right to know what they are paying for. The audience has the right to understand the extent to which the musical elements they are listening to are part of the live performance or pre-recorded material. If musicians explicitly communicate that certain parts of the performance use backing tracks as supplementary elements, this action aligns with the principle of honesty. On the other hand, if the use of backing tracks is concealed or employed to create the illusion of a fully live performance, such as with lip-syncing, from a deontological standpoint, this may be considered an ethical violation, regardless of whether the audience enjoys the performance or not.

In addition to emphasizing transparency, a deontological approach also highlights the importance of respecting the essence of performance art. Live music, traditionally, is valued for its spontaneity and the direct interaction between musicians and the audience. In this context, the use of backing tracks that replace core elements of a performance, such as lead vocals or essential instruments, may be regarded as a violation of these artistic values, while simultaneously neglecting the musicians' obligation to deliver an authentic performance that characterizes live shows.

However, deontology should also acknowledge the role of technology as part of the evolution of art. When backing tracks are utilized to support or complement a performance without compromising the value of authenticity, they cannot be considered deceptive, and their use can be deemed ethical. For instance, in performances that involve complex elements such as multimedia visualizations on stage, backing tracks are often necessary to maintain synchronization. In such situations, honesty remains a fundamental principle, whereby musicians or organizers are responsible for informing the audience about the use of technology as a supportive element intended to enhance the artistic experience rather than replace the authenticity of the live performance. Therefore, deontology provides a clear evaluative framework for how the use of backing tracks adheres to moral principles such as honesty, transparency, and respect for the performing arts. When these principles are violated, the action is generally considered unethical, regardless of the positive benefits that the audience may experience.

The Utilization of Backing Tracks from a Teleological Ethics Perspective

From a teleological ethics standpoint, the morality of an action is evaluated based on the outcomes it generates, with positive results such as happiness and knowledge being regarded as good, while negative outcomes like suffering and ignorance are considered as detrimental (Joyo, 2021). Consequently, the use of backing tracks would be deemed ethical if it produces positive outcomes, such as audience satisfaction and enjoyment. This is closely tied to the audience's perception of contemporary music quality standards.

In alignment with the advancements in music production technology in studios, the production of live music on stage will also naturally follow suit. In studio music production, virtual instruments offer greater freedom than what can be achieved with traditional instruments (Mulder, 1998). This undoubtedly creates new sounds that cannot be produced in the physical world. Consequently, listeners and music audiences become accustomed to sounds generated in the digital realm. As a result, audiences may subconsciously expect these sounds to be recreated in live performances, a possibility that can be realized through additional support such as backing tracks or sequencers. The audience's perception will compel musicians to deliver music with a rich sound quality that closely resembles the original, infused with an authentic live touch. This presents a dilemma for musicians, as achieving such audio quality often necessitates the use of backing tracks. This situation has led to the widespread adoption of backing tracks in live performances. McLuhan (1994, in Surahman, 2016), stated, technology shapes the way individuals

think and act within society; similarly, the use of backing tracks can influence musicians' approaches and behaviors in their professional endeavors. Furthermore, audiences may also alter their perceptions of what constitutes a good live performance, regardless of their awareness of the use of backing tracks on stage. A musician is not only responsible for reproducing musical information but also must interpret that information in a way that allows the audience to form their own interpretations of the presented musical work (Teixeira & Ferraz, 2018).

From a teleological perspective, the use of backing tracks in live performances can be considered ethical if the ultimate outcome provides greater benefits than drawbacks, particularly by creating satisfying and meaningful musical experiences for the audience. However, musicians must also consider transparency and authenticity to avoid miscommunication or manipulation through technological means. If the audience feels deceived, this would undoubtedly result in negative consequences, rendering the practice unethical. An illustrative case is the scandal involving Milli Vanili in 1990, who were caught lip-syncing due to technical issues with the backing track used during their live performance, leading to further problems, including the revocation of their Grammy Award (Knowles & Hewitt, 2011). Clearly, this was a negative consequence causing the use of backing tracks to become unethical.

From both deontological and teleological perspectives, the use of backing tracks in live performances is a complex phenomenon that requires careful evaluation. From a deontological standpoint, honesty and transparency are crucial in assessing this practice. Meanwhile, from a teleological perspective, the ultimate consequences, such as audience satisfaction or happiness, serve as the primary criteria for determining whether the action is ethical or not. Therefore, the use of backing tracks can be deemed ethical as long as the technology does not violate ethical principles, such as creating manipulations that harm the audience, and continues to provide meaningful and high-quality experiences that align with modern audience expectations. Striking a balance between artistic integrity, performance authenticity, and technological engagement is essential to ensure that the use of backing tracks remains within acceptable ethical boundaries.

## Creativity vs Liveness in the Use of Backing Tracks

The use of backing tracks is often regarded as an innovative approach to enhancing creativity, yet it is also debated whether this technology diminishes the essence or liveness of live performances. Such questions frequently arise in discussions about technological advancements across various fields, as they often involve innovation challenging established traditions. Innovation, by definition, refers to discovering new and distinct ways of accomplishing tasks (Hadiyati, 2011). Conversely, tradition encompasses habits or behavioral patterns passed down from previous generations. In the context of backing tracks, tradition represents the conventional methods employed by earlier musicians during live performances. Backing tracks, as a product of innovation, signify a departure from these traditional practices, offering an alternative approach to live performance. This raises the critical question: does the use of backing tracks emerge as a creative innovation that enhances the musician's artistry, or does it compromise the essence or authenticity of live performances, which have long been rooted in tradition?

To address this question, it is essential to first define what creativity entails. Creativity is the ability to modify or combine existing elements into something new (Fakhriyani, 2016). It also refers to the capacity to create or discover something valuable, often by utilizing existing components (Astuti & Aziz, 2019). In the context of backing tracks, musicians adapt their live performance approach by leveraging studio technology advancements that support greater portability and flexibility. Secondly, what does it mean to diminish or compromise the essence of an authentic live performance? A live performance embodies liveness which includes spontaneity, authenticity, and the inherent risks of meeting audience expectations in real time. The use of backing tracks can potentially undermine these live elements. This compromise involves sacrificing live authenticity to achieve audio quality that is flawless or closely mirrors the recorded version.

How can an equilibrium in the use of backing tracks be effectively established? The most fundamental reasoning posits that their application is optimal when backing tracks serve to enhance a musician's creativity in live performances while preserving the core essence of liveness.

Backing Tracks as a Manifestation of Creativity in Live Peformancers

Performing arts are intrinsically adaptive, evolving in response to societal and technological advancements. For instance, *Congwayndut* represents an innovative adaptation of wayang performances by integrating a combo band and contemporary *keroncong* music. This approach aims to make traditional culture more accessible to modern audiences, thereby preserving its cultural continuity (Wrahatnala, 2021). Similarly, the keroncong performance Sing Penting Keroncong incorporates interactive live streaming and genre fusion to broaden its appeal (Rachman & Utomo, 2017). These examples underscore the dynamic nature of performing arts, which continuously evolve to integrate emerging technologies. Within this framework, backing tracks can be perceived as a technological innovation in musical performance, harnessing advancements to foster artistic expression. By employing this approach, musicians not only ensure their continued relevance but also deliver novel and engaging experiences to their audiences.

Similarly, as with advancements in any field of technology, the use of technological tools must be approached with prudence. Humans must be able to position technology appropriately, treating it as an aid rather than a replacement (Adhimas et al., 2024). An aid is intended to support human efforts, not to replace them. In the same way, backing tracks are not meant to replace the role of musicians on stage but to complement and enrich the performance experience. For instance, a guitarist continues to play their instrument live, while the backing track provides supplementary layers of sound, such as bass or drums, which cannot be played live. This creates a balance between the authenticity of the live performance and the practicality of technology, allowing the audience to experience the liveness without compromising the production quality expected from modern performances.

Backing tracks not only play a role in the musical aspect but also support non-musical elements of a performance. Musicians often align their music with visual elements, such as video or lighting, to synchronize with the tempo of the performance (Chakraborty & Timoney, 2023). This synchronization requires a playback system, such as a backing track, to integrate tempo with visual content, choreography, or narrative, all of which are integral parts of a performance.

In conclusion, the use of backing tracks, when applied judiciously, represents a legitimate form of creativity in modern performance art. It is not merely a technical tool but also a medium that allows musicians to convey their artistic vision in a broader and more comprehensive manner.

Backing Tracks as a Compromise to the Authenticity of Live Performances

One of the primary attractions of live music performances is the spontaneity and uniqueness presented in each rendition. This element allows the audience to experience the energy and direct connection with the musicians. Although many modern musical contexts may not be entirely "live" by traditional definitions, the concept of liveness remains essential in creating meaning in music and influencing how audiences perceive and appreciate their musical experiences (Sanden, 2013). Thus, the use of backing tracks, which are inherently not live, can still be tolerated in practice. However, excessive dependence on backing tracks can lead to a loss of liveness in the performance. The music may sound overly "prerecorded," causing the audience to perceive the experience as less authentic. This, in turn, could diminish the audience's appreciation of the performance due to the lack of the dynamic qualities typically inherent in live performances. In a live performance, the direct interaction between the musicians, their instruments, and the audience is central to the artistic experience. Over-reliance on backing tracks can undermine the artistic value of the performance, as most musical elements are not

created live. Ideally, live music showcases the technical and emotional abilities of the musicians, qualities that are difficult to replicate through prerecorded elements. Therefore, the use of backing tracks should be carefully managed to prevent compromising the essence of authentic live artistry.

Live performances offer a distinct experience due to elements such as improvisation and interaction with the audience, which can influence how music is played (Swarbrick et al., 2019). In contrast, backing tracks are typically designed with rigid structures that limit musicians' opportunities for spontaneous improvisation or responding to the audience's energy. Improvisation is a crucial element making live performances feel fresh and unique. When musicians become overly constrained by patterns or tempo from the backing track, they lose flexibility to explore music spontaneously. This can render the performance monotonous or less dynamic, particularly for audiences who anticipate something different each time.

In conclusion, while backing tracks provide practical benefits, their excessive or unwise use may risk compromising the authenticity and artistic value of live performances. Therefore, it is essential for musicians to find the right balance so that backing tracks remain supportive tools rather than substitutes in their performances.

## *Conclusion*

In terms of ethics, the utilization of backing tracks can be considered acceptable only if conducted transparently and honestly, without diminishing the integrity or authenticity of live performances. Within a deontological ethical framework, musicians have a moral obligation to present genuine and truthful performances to the audience, clearly indicating if any musical elements derive from backing tracks. Should backing tracks be utilized to substitute key components of the live performance without clear disclosure to the audience, this may be regarded as unethical, potentially deceiving viewers who expect a completely authentic live experience. Conversely, under a teleological perspective, the utilization of backing tracks is deemed ethically justifiable if it ultimately provides a satisfying and meaningful experience for the audience while maintaining a balance between authenticity and musical quality. The employment of backing tracks that enriches the performance and meets audience expectations can be considered ethical, provided it does not create a manipulative impression or undermine the value of the audience's investment in attending a concert.

In the context of creativity and liveness, the utilization of backing tracks can be conceptualized as an innovation that enhances musicians' creative expression and enriches the performance experience, thereby facilitating new avenues for exploration in composition, visual elements, and music production. When employed judiciously, backing tracks do not detract from the liveness of a performance; rather, they provide opportunities for musicians to engage directly with the audience, even in the presence of technologically augmented elements. Conversely, excessive reliance on backing tracks or their use in place of musical components that ought to be performed live may undermine the spontaneity and dynamism that are hallmarks of live performances, thereby compromising the essence of liveness.

Therefore, to sustain a balance between creativity and authenticity, the implementation of backing tracks must be approached with careful consideration. This necessitates that technology be utilized to augment rather than supplant live elements, while ensuring that the audience continues to perceive the authenticity and spontaneity inherent in the musicians' performance. Achieving a balance between ethical principles, such as honesty and transparency, and the imperative to preserve the essence of live performances is essential for ensuring that the use of backing tracks remains ethically sound and conducive to the artistic quality of a performance.

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