

# Music Mediation and the Potential for Change

## An Approach via Convention Theory

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### Introduction

The question of social change processes – or changes towards the social, which this volume raises, is closely linked to questions about the intentions and goals of the changes. How should music organisations change to become more social? Which ideas of an (improved) social reality underlie these intentions? And what could the contribution of music mediation in this respect be?

These questions involve an examination of desirable goals and possible orientations in social situations (Zembylas 2019). In the context of music organisations and music mediation, it quickly becomes clear that these goals, orientations and the associated expectations can be very different from actual decisions and actions. For example, it was public pressure from, amongst others, US feminists that led to the first woman being accepted into the Vienna Philharmonic in 1997. Around 25 years later, 23 of the 144 positions are held by women (Kaindlstorfer 2022). This example shows that the value of (gender) justice has clearly not been realised through a rapid, measurable and assessable change (i.e. 50% of positions held by women), although this would have been a possible, socially just, value-oriented and factually rationalisable action. This is partly due to the fact that different explicit evaluations and implicit orientations are present at the same time, creating a need for negotiation. While values represent social orientations, evaluations are social and communicative processes of weighing up, negotiating and justifying (Bogusz 2013), and are therefore dependent on a wide range of situational conditions and constellations. The extent to which social changes are implemented depends not only on the ability of individuals to assert themselves and on the feasibility of the principle, but also on the ability of different actors to coordinate themselves situationally and collectively on the basis of shared interpretations. As coordination and evaluation options, conventions represent such “interpretative frameworks” (Gonon 2023, 51) that

can be used by actors in uncertain situations – situations with different options for action and decision-making – as a point of reference. Mediators play a co-constructive role in these coordination processes.

After a brief introduction to the theoretical foundations of the sociology and economics of conventions, the focus here is on the associated concept “mediators as intermediaries”. This is followed by a discussion of possible questions from the perspective of music mediation, using approaches based on the theory of conventions. Subsequently, a thought experiment is used to highlight the potential, conflicts, and resistance in cooperative formations of music mediation. Finally, both the analytical and practical possibilities of applying the lenses of convention theory for music mediation are outlined.

## **Theoretical Foundations: The Economy and Sociology of Conventions**

The economy and sociology of conventions (in short EC/SC or convention theory) (Diaz-Bone and Thévenot 2010; Diaz-Bone and de Larquier 2020) is a theoretical framework suitable for analysing different intentions, interpretations, coordination possibilities and negotiation processes, and their effects. As a socio-economic and pragmatic institutional theory (Diaz-Bone 2023), EC/SC is a transdisciplinary development in the social sciences that has been emerging since the 1980s from France, sharing basic assumptions with ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. In the English-speaking and German-speaking world, too, researchers are increasingly turning to convention-theoretical approaches in both theoretical and empirically guided research (Diaz-Bone 2018, XXII). This also includes applications of the theory to the sociology of music (Schwegler 2024; Prokop and Reitsamer forthcoming 2025) and in educational science (Leemann and Imdorf 2019) as relevant fields of reference for music mediation. Convention theory deals with how capable, competent actors coordinate their behaviour and coordination logics, in the sense of conventions, in order to overcome uncertainties in social situations (Boltanski and Thévenot 2014). Meanwhile, eight conventions have been described as interpretative schemata and guidelines for action: the market convention, the industrial convention, the domestic convention, the convention of opinion, the inspired convention, the civic convention, the green convention and the network convention (Diaz-Bone and de Larquier 2022, 14).

The EC/SC assumes that all conventions radically coexist in markets and organisations and that there is no simple assignment of individual quality conventions to individual institutional arrangements (Diaz-Bone 2018, 161). This

can be illustrated using the example of a music organisation: When evaluating a concert, the focus is on the reputation of the orchestra (domestic convention), the originality of the interpretation of the work (inspired convention), and the number of visitors (convention of opinion). In addition, the price of a concert ticket (market convention) and the broadest possible participation (civic convention) can provide orientation, which illustrates that conventions often conflict with each other. Criteria of the green convention (CO2 footprint of an orchestra) are also gaining in relevance and must be negotiated with the productivity requirements of a touring orchestra (industrial convention).

## Mediators as Intermediaries

The example illustrates that the simultaneous presence of different conventions requires coordination. This is where the mediators, referred to as intermediaries in the EC/SC, come into play. Like Bourdieu's cultural sociology (Bourdieu 1999), the EC/SC places a particular focus on the role of mediators (as people), but it also includes the co-presence of mediating objects or organisations in mediation processes to a greater extent (Diaz-Bone 2018, 109). These human and non-human intermediaries mediate between different conventions and are not neutral in the process, but actively and productively contribute to the co-construction and organisation of situations (*ibid.*, 110). In addition, their mediating activity enables compromises to be reached. Representatives of the EC/SC argue that the French term “*intermédiaire*” emphasises more strongly than the English term “mediator” that co-construction takes place through these processes (*ibid.*).

Convention theory is therefore relevant for research on music mediation, especially since it deals in depth with the concepts of intermediaries and intermediation (Schad-Spindler forthcoming 2025). The concepts of convention theory enable an analysis of how value orientations and quality perceptions in music and music mediation are established by mediators and how these in turn influence the perception of actors – musicians, audiences, music managers, sponsors, funding bodies, and other music mediators. Conversely, questions can also be examined as to how other actors and objects influence music mediators or music mediation processes and which conventions are used in the process. Mediators therefore play a crucial role in music production and reception: by establishing relationships between music producers and listeners, they ensure that musicians create something that appeals to the audience. They also have an identity-forming function, because they help listeners to establish

a connection between pieces of music and their own perception (Negus 2002, 505; Diaz-Bone and Schwegler forthcoming 2025).

As mentioned, intermediaries or mediators are not only human beings. Here, convention theory also refers to the actor-network theory (ANT), which is developing in parallel. In the ANT context, Hennion (2015) describes non-human elements (so-called actants) as a complex network of music mediators – including instruments, scores, productions, concert venues, and forms of transmission in music institutions and schools (recordings and digital media in particular should also be taken into account). In their networked interaction, these mediators regulate the composition, performance, and aesthetic appreciation of music. They also discipline the bodies and expressive possibilities of the musicians and listeners through their form and the possibilities and limitations that their materiality provides (Schad-Spindler forthcoming 2025). For the audience, a spatial arrangement can, for example, restrict autonomy and mobility (because concert seats are firmly anchored in the hall and have a socially structuring effect based on price categories). Even the removal of seats can enable dance movements and temporarily dissolve social orders. With regard to musicians, musical scores can restrict the autonomy of interpretation or, conversely, expand it. Mediators enable the communication and comprehension of music – not by directly addressing its aesthetic content or social authenticity, but by shaping how both are collectively constructed through the interactions of people and objects within a shared network. (Hennion and Levaux 2021, 3)

The fact that both people and things perform mediating activities (Boltanski and Chiapello 2003, 155) suggests that an additional investment in the qualification of individuals is required in order to be recognised and valued as a music mediator. One way of legitimising and institutionalising this role is through professional, certified training at universities or colleges, i.e. professional academic competence in the sense of the industrial convention (Schad-Spindler forthcoming 2025). As will be explained later, their work not only involves mediating between music (producers) and audiences, but also involves working in cooperative relationships between different organisations and their expectations. As will be shown, this requires an expanded competence profile of music mediators as actors in the in-between, in cultural-political negotiation processes (Schad 2019; Landau-Donnelly et al. 2023), which could be more strongly integrated into education and training with regard to the social-transformative potential of music mediation.

A second path illustrates that transitions between conventions are also essential for legitimisation: the genealogy of the representation of the interests of music mediators in Austria shows that it was initially about cooperative

concerns and informal exchange, organised through the formation of a platform (network convention). Increasingly, the orientation towards common concerns over labour and employment issues also gained ground (civic convention), so that in 2023 the foundation of an association was formalised (industrial convention).

As a relevant side note that cannot be elaborated on in more detail in this chapter: a conventional theoretical view of music mediation calls for a focus on both human and other technical and material entities in joint coordination processes. The development of artificial intelligence (Solans et al. 2021) and its consequences for music production and reception, and thus also for mediation as an intermediary process, makes these connections and thus the need for research at these coordinative interfaces even clearer.

## Music Mediation in the Context of Conventions

The coordination of different conventions takes place through collective and contextual processes that can be (co-)orchestrated by music mediators: a music mediator who works with a school class in a large concert hall sets and uses different conventions than a music mediator who performs with a classical orchestra in a train station (Schad-Spindler forthcoming 2025). The example also shows that by changing situations, conventions in the sense of social potential can not only be mobilised, but also irritated and expanded: the first situation shows that children (also) have the right not only to enter spaces usually used by adults, but also to play in them. Participation and entitlement, as well as social commitment are mobilised (criteria of the civic convention). The second situation illustrates how spaces driven by efficiency and acceleration (industrial convention) can be transformed into places of contemplation and creativity (inspired convention) or lead to the spontaneous formation of a public gathering (civic convention) through music-related interventions. However, the two examples also show that these situations are only created temporarily or as exceptions to the rules: the concert hall is otherwise visited, played in and organised by adults. The train station concourse reverts to a place of passage and anonymity.

These insights into situations show that the theory of conventions offers approaches for reflecting on the connection between social power relations on the one hand, and possibilities for change through music mediation on the other. Sensitising questions are particularly suitable for training critical skills as a preliminary stage of possible changes. With the help of the instruments of the theory of conventions, the following questions can be asked:

Within the *market convention*, economic factors in the narrower sense are the reference parameters. Who has access to which resources and budgets? Who exerts influence on distribution channels and thus on the visibility and demand for certain kinds of music? What music is in demand by customers? Regarding questions of transformation: How can music mediation contribute to creating a market for certain underrated music? How much are sponsors willing to invest in music mediation, and with what expectations?

The *inspired convention* refers to aesthetic and innovative criteria. This can be used to analyse the following questions, for example: How are certain aesthetic norms and values promoted or suppressed in music mediation? Which genres, artists, and styles are preferred, which are marginalised? What is considered good or innovative music mediation? Which works are considered ingenious but uncommunicable? In terms of transformation, how can music mediation contribute to establishing new aesthetic criteria, for example by creating new listening experiences or innovative sound worlds?

The following questions are examples related to the *industrial convention*: What is the basis for professional music mediation? Who is considered a qualified music mediator? How does music mediation work in music organisations (such as orchestras, concert halls, festivals), what are its tasks, how is it integrated into overall processes? What routinised processes and standards does it develop, and according to which criteria and standards is it controlled and measured? In terms of social change, how can music mediation, for example, create new forms of cooperation through partnerships that overcome established forms of the organisational division of labour (e.g. through the interaction of educational and cultural institutions)?

In the *civic convention*, power relations in music mediation are shaped by state institutions and policies. Which music or form of music mediation is subsidised by the state? On the basis of which political objectives? Are there any forms of censorship or governmental restrictions that affect music mediation? In terms of transformation: How can music mediation contribute to enabling more socially just access to music? How can certain marginalised music styles or musicians gain more social recognition through mediation programmes?

Regarding the *convention of opinion*, questions may arise such as: How does music mediation contribute to prominence and stardom? How does music mediation create a certain image of musicians, composers, conductors, festivals or concert venues? How does music mediation co-create social media? In the frame of possible transformations, it may be a question of how music mediation can help to make musical works or musicians who have not been publicly recognised more well-known.

The *domestic convention* is concerned with such things as trust, authority, and tradition (Diaz-Bone 2018, 162). This convention can be linked to the study of issues related to the preservation of certain musical traditions through music mediation. The role of music mediation in relation to musical craftsmanship, i.e. learning to play certain instruments, is also linked to this convention. The continuation of family-based musical traditions or modes of reception (such as regular concert attendance) can also be reflected upon using the categories of this convention. Conversely, social change can be mobilised by critically questioning the dominance of certain musical traditions or by promoting and linking some traditions to others.

Corresponding questions can also be formulated for the *green convention*, which deal with the contribution of music mediation to aspects of ecology and sustainability. Last but not least, the *network convention* offers starting points, for example for investigating questions such as how relationships between people or organisations can be established through music mediation, how music mediators professionally network with each other, how working on temporary projects shapes music mediation etc.

These and numerous other questions can inspire a critical analysis of the social role of music mediation in terms of its conservative or transformative function. For such analyses, it should be borne in mind that the conventions offer guidance, but should be considered in an overall context: not in isolation, but in co-presence and co-creation. For social action is the “art of living in different worlds” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2014, 206). The worlds – conventions – take shape in concrete situations “that take place in the same space and with the same people” (ibid., 213).

## **The Possibilities for Potential and Conflict in Music Mediation Co-operation**

To reflect more in-depth on the role of music mediation in promoting change in music organisations and beyond, the following is a thought experiment that draws on a combination of different empirical experiences and the analysis of literature on music mediation practices (Chaker and Petri-Preis 2022; Petri-Preis 2022; Müller-Brozovic and Weber 2022). The exemplary heuristics of the thought experiment serve to analyse possible potentials and resistances against the background of the questions of social turns, changes, and transformations. As already described, music mediators not only act between music producers and listeners, but as intermediaries also coordinate social relationships in the broader sense. This includes, in particular, cooperation between organisations

that pursue concerns in the field of music mediation – but possibly with different concerns, interpretations, and logic with regard to their action. This is linked to the assumption that a constructive approach to resistance, disagreement and conflict can provide impulses for change. This is particularly important for dealing with areas of tension that arise in relation to cooperation connected to cultural participation (Stoffers 2019). The pragmatically oriented sociology of conventions (Diaz-Bone 2011) also provides a theoretical and analytical tool for representing possible obstacles and conflicts in cooperative social relationships, thus enabling criticism and discussion to serve as possible drivers for changing attitudes and ways of working.

Let us assume that there are two organisations that want to cooperate with each other in the field of music mediation: Organisation *Communico* is a socio-cultural centre that was founded in the early 2000s and is in a decentralised district of a larger city where the proportion of people with a migration background is particularly high. In this environment, the proportion of people with socio-economic challenges is higher than in other districts. The centre offers free, so-called low threshold activities for people of all ages – children, young people, and adults – such as dance and theatre workshops, club nights and concerts, choirs, film evenings, and communal meals. The average age of the visitors is 35. The team and management of the socio-cultural centre are predominantly women, the majority of whom have a migration background and speak several languages, among them Turkish and Arabic. The employees are mainly university graduates, some are artists, others come from social professions. *Communico* is guided by the objective of enabling everyone to participate in art and culture.

Organisation *Classico* is a music organisation that was founded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The music organisation is centrally located, the surrounding area is characterised by tourist attractions. The organisation is frequented by an international tourist audience, in addition to a local regular audience of classical music aficionados and subscribers. The music education programme is aimed primarily at families and children up to the age of 10. The average age of visitors is 60. The organisation's staff is international, with people who have academic qualifications in music or humanities. *Classico* is oriented towards the objective of promoting musical culture through musical excellence and outstanding musicians.

On the basis of six specifically relevant conventions, both potentials and possible disagreement and resistance regarding changes can be outlined through the cooperation of the two fictitious organisations:



Convention	Possible Potentials	Possible Resistance and Conflicts
<p>Inspired Convention (creativity, innovation)</p>	<p>The collaboration brings innovation, ideas, and creativity to both organisations. Classico's music education programme benefits from the more experimental approaches and exciting spaces that Communico offers. All those involved can experience inspiring joint events, concerts and workshops.</p>	<p>Classico might have concerns about the artistic integrity and devaluation of its musical standards if it focuses on mediating activities. Communico might be unsure to what extent the musical knowledge and preferences of its employees and audience would allow it to meet Classico's expectations in creative, music-led processes.</p>
<p>Civic Convention (equality, fairness, participation)</p>	<p>The collaboration could promote cultural participation by offering all kinds of people – in particular the diverse audience of Communico – live music experiences at a high level, regardless of musical preferences and previous experience, educational background, origin and socio-economic situation. Classico will fulfil its mandate as a publicly funded cultural institution more effectively.</p>	<p>Classico might fear that its funding might be tied to the implementation of socio-political objectives in the future. Communico might have concerns about the autonomy of its programme design. The audience of Communico might also criticise the fact that women wearing hijabs work as cleaning staff at Classico, but no musician representing a marginalised group is visible in the main orchestra. The employees of Communico may also be critical of the fact that musicians with whom they work in their programmes are only allowed to play in special community programmes at Classico.</p>

Convention	Possible Potentials	Possible Resistance and Conflicts
<p>Market Convention (demand, price, exchange)</p>	<p>The collaboration could open up new sources of income for both Classico and Communico by attracting a wider audience or finding new sponsors and funding.</p>	<p>Competition could arise over funding and sponsorship money, but also over the respective contributions to the collaboration – especially if the musicians of Classico earn significantly more than the curators of Communico, while the Communico employees feel that they are more committed to the collaboration. Nothing has changed regarding the fact that the prices of concerts in the main programme are unaffordable for Communico target groups.</p>
<p>Industrial Convention (planning, standardisation, qualifications)</p>	<p>The collaboration could bring efficiency gains through the joint use of resources (e.g. event locations, marketing channels, etc.) and the division of labour in combining expertise.</p>	<p>Different organisational structures (flat hierarchies at Communico, steep hierarchies at Classico) could lead to conflicts, especially when it comes to decision-making. Classico could have concerns about quality standards and the rules and routines (rehearsals, discipline) needed to achieve them, while Communico could express concerns about over-regulation and the loss of flexibility that would result. Overall, coordinating appointments, rehearsal times, and work processes could be difficult.</p>

Convention	Possible Potentials	Possible Resistance and Conflicts
Domestic Convention (tradition, handicraft, familiarity)	Different musical traditions, instruments and skills can come together in workshops or mentoring programmes. The respective audiences can be familiarised with them. This enriches the repertoire of the organisations and the diversity of musical production.	The clash of different musical traditions, interpretations and standards of precision/handling of instruments could lead to discord between Communico and Classico.
Convention of Opinion (fame, glory, recognition)	The collaboration can increase public awareness of the two organisations and their objectives (through accompanying press and social media work). This allows the respective audiences to learn more about the other organisation. While the use of world-famous musicians for children and the socially and economically disadvantaged creates public recognition for Classico, it is the recognition and visibility of everyday social commitment through cooperation with a world-famous music company for Communico.	A conflict could arise if Classico fears that the collaboration could affect its perception as an elitist, high-quality, established cultural institution and thus dilute its brand image. Classico could also have concerns about the reactions of its older audience if the collaboration contributes to a diversified and younger audience. Communico could be in a dilemma not to let its audience become the visible object (token) of symbolic but superficial changes.

**Table 1:** Potentials and possible disagreements regarding changes. Source: Own illustration.

## Music Mediators – Acting in the *In-between*

This reflection on cooperative music mediation activities shows that the economy and sociology of conventions offer a comprehensive approach to penetrating the complex social, cultural, organisational, and economic aspects of music mediation, as well as the associated interpretation and decision-making processes. In line with the pragmatic orientation of the EC/SC, this offers both analytical and practical possibilities for driving forward both the potential for change and exploring resistance to change. Music mediators often take on overlooked intermediary activities, not only in music production but also in cultural policy (Bennett 2020). They not only bring organisations with different orientations into exchange relationships in the sense of mediating music (production), but are also required to know about the respective logics of action and to convey them to different stakeholders. This intermediate position is as necessary as it is challenging, if it is assumed that decisions are made on the basis of different conventions, and their associated resistances and potentials. Unlike in the fictitious case, these are often much less obvious in everyday experience, due to their simultaneous coexistence. Nevertheless, models and structures can help to simulate scenarios and develop alternatives to address problems and to gain new orientation and options.

This ultimately leads to the question of how the critical competence of music mediators can be promoted in such a way that they can proactively and co-constructively contribute their specific human abilities such as empathy and imagination to the design of social, cooperative relationships in complex situations with other mediating elements and technologies. The question of qualification is particularly relevant here: music mediators should not only acquire musical skills in their university education, but also knowledge of cultural management and organisation, cultural financing and policy, legal frameworks, pedagogical and socio-cultural work, as well as networking and communication (Petri-Preis 2022). In addition, practical experience is integrated into the training, which, among other things, is used to train situational decision-making skills. The reflection in this chapter makes it clear that, in addition to interdisciplinary professional skills, the training and continuous training of critical-analytical thinking, negotiation skills, and mediation skills can be very important for the mediation activity. To return to the questions raised at the beginning: the question of the objectives of social change processes is linked to divergent conventions, which, however, are not arbitrary, due to their relation to the common good. In other words, conventions are per se hypothetical and changeable; they can be reviewed, rejected or reinterpreted by different actors. Indeed, the assumptions made with the thought experiment need to be tested

in the empirical social world. For this reason, this article ends by indicating the potentials of a research project that engages with convention theory and music mediation. *Turning (the) social* as a potential of music mediation thus includes the need for research-based and critical engagement with the various possibilities, resistances and compromises in mediation processes that arise in social situations. Empirically grounded research framed through convention theory could also further enhance reflection and exchange between music mediators on their own values, motivations, and objectives in the *in-between*.

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