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Personal Branding in the Classical Music Industry in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract: This article explores personal branding in classical music through the lens of digital media, focusing on self-representation, communication, and visibility. Based on semi-structured interviews with 16 professionals from the industry, it reveals that personal branding is vital yet unevenly practiced. Social media play an ambivalent role, offering both opportunities and challenges. Network-building emerges as key to career development and audience growth.

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The dual function of branding, as a career and audience tool, is emphasized. Findings offer insights for musicians, cultural organizations, and researchers.

Keywords: classical music, social media, personal branding, audience development, public relations, self-representation

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Le personal branding dans l'industrie de la musique classique à l'ère des réseaux sociaux

Résumé : Cet article explore le personal branding dans la musique classique à travers le prisme des médias numériques, en mettant l'accent sur l'auto-représentation, la communication et la visibilité. Basé sur des entretiens semi-directifs avec 16 professionnels du secteur, il révèle que le personal branding est essentiel, mais appliqué de manière inégale. Les réseaux sociaux jouent un rôle ambivalent, offrant à la fois des opportunités et des défis. La création de réseaux apparaît comme un élément clé du développement de carrière et de l'élargissement du public. La double fonction du branding, en tant qu'outil de carrière et de développement de l'audience, est soulignée. Les résultats offrent des pistes de réflexion aux musiciens, aux organisations culturelles et aux chercheurs.

Mots-clés: musique classique, réseaux sociaux, personal branding, développement du public, auto-représentation

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Introduction

The emergence of media and, particularly, social media has marked a significant turning point for numerous professions, including those within the classical music industry. In the contemporary globalised context, music has become more accessible than ever before. The development of advanced technologies, alongside the proliferation of various digital platforms and services, enables music to reach audiences directly, while offering an unprecedented breadth of choice. In this context, important questions arise regarding the selection criteria for musicians performing at concerts, and the extent to which an artist's personal brand influences such decisions. While personal branding plays a role across professional domains, it assumes particular importance for individuals in the public sphere, such as musicians and conductors.

The primary aim of this paper is to explore the concept of personal branding within the classical music industry. Specifically, the research examines the processes through which artists, both soloists and conductors, are selected for performances, as well as the ways in which musicians can strategically navigate the digital environment and leverage social media platforms as instruments for self-presentation and career advancement. In addition, one of the paper's key objectives is to assess the role of personal branding in the democratisation and popularisation of classical music, as well as in audience development. In this paper, personal branding is approached as a

communication practice within digital media environments, where musicians actively construct and manage their professional identities. Rather than focusing solely on promotional or marketing dimensions, personal branding is examined as a contemporary form of self-representation, mediatization, and visibility management (Marwick, 2013; Baym, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013). The digital transformation of classical music careers thus reflects broader shifts in how individuals negotiate their public personas across platforms, audiences, and cultural institutions. By offering behind-the-scenes perspectives into the workings of the industry and shedding light on what it means to pursue a musical career as a young artist in the digital era, such insights may contribute to audience education and foster closer connections between performers and listeners. Drawing on interviews with industry stakeholders, including artists, communication and festival managers, media editors, and journalists, alongside relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, this study provides a comprehensive examination of the above-mentioned issues.

1. Classical Music and Musicians as Products: Economic, Career and Market Perspectives

Classical music is widely regarded as an art form but simultaneously operates as an economic product (Wang, 2016). As Bergauer (2024, p. 8) observes: "We in the arts are also tasked with getting people who don't know much about our product to buy and donate." In a cultural climate where the arts are often not prioritized (Beeching, 2020; Markusen & Brown, 2014; Bergauer, 2024), questions of financial sustainability remain persistent. Some advocate for public support of certain genres deemed culturally significant (Wang, 2016), while policymakers often demand reduced subsidies and greater accessibility (Lebrecht, 1996). The recent elimination of public funding for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra exemplifies the ongoing relevance of these debates (Brock, 2025; City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, 2024). Beyond policy decisions, internal disputes reflect broader tensions over financial precarity, including protests for higher wages at the Croatian Radiotelevision Symphony Orchestra (Saraga, 2023) and strikes at the Belgrade Philharmonic demanding fair pay and transparent hiring (Belgrade Philharmonic, 2025). As labor-intensive fields, arts and culture face rising production costs and increasingly rely on business-oriented management models to sustain operations (Bergauer, 2024; Bull & Scharff, 2021; Carboni, 2012). In parallel, musicians' careers have become nonlinear, marked by entrepreneurial approaches (Peters, 1997; Beeching, 2020). As Ruiz (2025) notes, the sustainability of classical music increasingly depends on reigniting entrepreneurial practices. At the same time, while "arts entrepreneurship literature often reinforces the distinctions between arts and business, […] positioning entrepreneurship as the means and art as the end" (Callander, 2019, p. 73), attention to business development not only supports but can strengthen artistic work (Beeching, 2020). Consequently, artistic and entrepreneurial identities are often intertwined, blurring distinctions between personal branding and business management (Shepherd, 2005). Diving deeper, entrepreneurship "is almost

always situated within the domain of business and involves some type of market exchange, giving it immediate economic significance. […] [Moreover, it also represents] the attempt to change the world according to a particular vision" (Godwyn, 2009, p. 36). As Shepherd (2005) emphasizes, personal selling increasingly depends on the artist's personality and public image. Therefore, it is closely related to neoliberalism, which "engineers a new kind of subject, the 'entrepreneur of the self', by promoting neoconservative ideals and values like autonomy, personal growth, self-reliance, and self-government" (Trifonova, 2024). As a way to succeed, young artists embrace the risk-taking, self-reinvention, generating their own market demand, and taking the leap-of-faith, all of which are tied to (self-)entrepreneurship (Christiaens, 2019).

Nevertheless, discomfort persists around framing art as a market-driven product (Beeching, 2020). From a financial standpoint, limited audience demographics exacerbate these tensions. Classical music remains predominantly consumed by wealthier minorities (Wang, 2016), and critiques of elitism, patriarchy, and whiteness remain relevant (Curtin & Whittaker, 2022; Bull & Scharff, 2021). These associations contribute to barriers in broadening audience diversity. Despite such critiques, classical music offers distinct cultural and educational value (Wang, 2016). For many listeners, quality supersedes pricing concerns (Wilcox et al., 2015), though pricing itself functions as a core marketing tool (Godin, 2018). Accessibility extends beyond ticket costs to include venue convenience, atmosphere, and reducing psychological barriers to participation (Barlow & Shibli, 2007; Markusen & Brown, 2014). In this context, education serves as a crucial strategy for audience expansion. As Wang (2016) argues, offering early exposure to musical experiences fosters both initial engagement and long-term loyalty. Audiences benefit not only from aesthetic and emotional experiences but also from mastering complex practices and participating in collaborative cultural life (Wang, 2016). Education thus plays a dual role: lowering entry barriers and nurturing repeat attendance (Bergauer, 2024). For managers and musicians, building habitual engagement fosters sustained relationships and audience loyalty (Wang, 2016; Bergauer, 2024), following the marketing logic of guiding audiences through awareness, consideration, conversion, retention, and advocacy.

2. Personal Branding: Concept and Application in Music

We live in a branded world (Carah & Brodmerkel, 2020; Peters, 1997). Purchasing choices, leisure activities, and cultural consumption reflect personal identity; as Khedher (2015, p. 120) notes: "Everything communicates." In this sense, individuals become brands, much like corporate products (Peters, 1997; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). While individuals select aspects to highlight, branding itself is inescapable (Snodgrass & Brucks, 2004). Brands represent more than function or aesthetics, they embody identity, reputation, and public perception (Tomić, 2016). Reputation, as "the collective representation of past performance" (Wilcox et al., 2015, p. 295), similarly applies to personal brands developed through artistic projects or entrepreneurial

ventures (Gioia, 2021). While marketing fosters storytelling and connection (Godin, 2018), sustained branding relies on consistent values and authentic engagement (Wilcox et al., 2015). Digitalization and social media have reshaped branding by decentralizing control (Phillips & Young, 2009). Bergauer (2024) identifies key branding elements: top-of-mind presence, sustained audience interest, and advocacy. In classical music, revitalized repertoire, community engagement, and inspiring experiences are central (Gioia, 2021). Performers increasingly engage audiences beyond the stage, building personal narratives to deepen connections (Woody, 2022; Beeching, 2020). Physical and psychological distance between performer and audience (Markusen & Brown, 2014) underscores the value of direct communication (Beeching, 2020; Ferenčić, 2012). Commissioning new works enhances visibility for both composers and performers (Beeching, 2020), strengthening personal and institutional brands (Shepherd, 2005; Gorbatov et al., 2018). Personal branding incorporates self-promotion, positioning, and development (Ilies, 2018), while public perceptions, much like brand equity, shape reputation (Phillips & Young, 2009; Gorbatov et al., 2020). Trust remains central to audience loyalty (Godin, 2018; Bergauer, 2024). Self-branding involves both constructing an identity and making it accessible (Khedher, 2013). Theoretical foundations span marketing, sociology, psychology, and economics (Gorbatov et al., 2018), with Goffman (2000) emphasizing identity performance and Shepherd (2005) positioning identity as pre-constructed for presentation. Yet, Goffman's dramaturgical model may not fully capture digital branding complexities (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Khedher (2013, 2015) proposes online personal branding models, while Philbrick and Cleveland (2015) outline a six-step branding process. Shafiee et al. (2020) stress strategic goal-setting, and Gorbatov et al. (2020) highlight appeal, differentiation, and recognition as core dimensions. Expertise and credibility remain crucial (Bonsu & Anim-Wright, 2024). The rise of personal branding corresponds to shifting employment structures and technological change (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). Personal branding enables career differentiation (Snodgrass & Brucks, 2004; Gorbatov et al., 2018), balancing market responsiveness and authenticity (Shepherd, 2005). This tension reflects the dual imperative: remain true to oneself while meeting audience expectations. While some argue that everyone possesses a personal brand (Tomić, 2020; Jacobson, 2020; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015), others assert it requires active management (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Szántó & Radácsi, 2023). Without intentional control, others define one's image (Shepherd, 2005). Personal branding thus creates competitive advantage through strategically communicated traits and narratives (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Bonsu & Anim-Wright, 2024; Beeching, 2020). In flexible, project-based careers, personal branding is increasingly essential (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Musicians must evolve their brands and foster engagement both online and offline (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015; Beeching, 2020), guided by consistency, clarity, uniqueness, and authenticity (Tomić, 2020; Shepherd, 2005; Jacobson, 2020). Authenticity builds credibility (Ilies, 2018), though Godin (2018, p. 77) cautions that "authenticity in the marketplace is a myth." Ultimately, personal branding demands strategic integration of audience understanding, narrative creation, and performance (Bonsu & Anim-

Wright, 2024; Beeching, 2020). Taking a step back, the user's "need to adopt a strategic promotional mindset" (Carah & Brodmerkel, 2020, p. 8), besides highlighting the required additional labour, partly is where the critiques of the neoliberal self-entrepreneur stem from. Additionally, shifting to inmaterial labour rooted in creativity, workers were not only transformed into "human capital", but their "self" became "capital" (Christiaens, 2019).

3. The Role of Social Media, Personal Branding, and Audience Development in Classical Music

Social media, defined as participatory platforms enabling users to share information, opinions, and experiences (Safko & Brake, 2009), play a central role in contemporary personal branding. For classical musicians, these platforms serve not only as promotional tools but also as channels for identity construction. Beeching (2020) highlights that articulating who one is through words and images may be difficult, but it is essential to creating an authentic brand. In this framework, every action and omission, whether online or offline, contributes to shaping public perception (Peters, 1997; Shepherd, 2005). A well-maintained digital presence increases visibility and helps build an engaged audience (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). As Shepherd (2005) emphasizes, visibility is one of the core drivers behind personal branding. Musicians who actively communicate with audiences, through personal websites, curated social media feeds, or interactive content, strengthen their professional identity and foster trust. Runtz (2024) underscores the practical implications: today, even concert organizers consider artists' social media following when programming events.

However, effective branding in digital spaces requires more than just visibility, it demands strategy and authenticity. The latter refers to "consistency between an entity's internal values and its external expressions" (Lehman et al., 2018, p. 6). Beeching (2020) encourages musicians to move past fear of judgment and perfectionism, advocating for consistent sharing of content that invites the audience into the creative process. Behind-the-scenes posts, rehearsal insights, and personal reflections create a sense of intimacy, allowing audiences to feel part of the artistic journey. This, in turn, supports community-building and emotional investment. Still, social media operate within algorithmic and oversaturated ecosystems, where influence is earned rather than guaranteed (Safko & Brake, 2009). Shepherd (2005) compares the competitive nature of digital branding to Darwinian selection, where only a few stand out amid a multitude of self-promoters. Visibility may be fleeting unless supported by high-quality artistic output and a consistent narrative (Snodgrass & Brucks, 2004; Godin, 2018). Beyond promotion, social media also facilitate two-way interaction, enabling musicians to engage in conversation rather than one-way broadcasting (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). This dialogic function aligns closely with audience development, which Alnasser and Yi (2023) define as a strategic process of building and sustaining audiences based on their needs, behaviors, and motivations. As Barlow and Shibli (2007) and Jiang (2019) note, this includes marketing,

programming, education, customer service, and even venue accessibility. For classical musicians, whose identities often merge with their art, these interactions are particularly potent. As Bergauer (2024, p. 44) observes, "art is not the problem, but the packaging", audiences crave stories, human connection, and shared experiences, not just polished performances. Beeching (2020) reinforces this point: promotion is not about self-aggrandizement but about inviting people to connect with the music and its creator. Nonetheless, barriers remain. New audiences often feel culturally excluded or intimidated by classical music's reputation for elitism and intellectualism (Barlow & Shibli, 2007; Bull & Scharff, 2021). Strategies to overcome these perceptions include personal storytelling, casual venue formats, and direct communication that demystifies the concert-going experience (Beeching, 2020; Markusen & Brown, 2014). Audience development thus becomes both a communication and education task. Education also plays a fundamental role in long-term engagement. Wang (2016) advocates for inclusive music education that cultivates critical listening, aesthetic appreciation, and cultural fluency. Similarly, Fineberg (2006) and Markusen & Brown (2014) suggest that meaningful artistic engagement arises from active interpretation, not passive reception. Informed music criticism, too, supports this process, guiding audiences through unfamiliar experiences (Alessandri et al., 2020). Institutions employ a wide array of audience development strategies, including digital technology, partnerships, targeted programming, and market segmentation (Alnasser & Yi, 2023). These efforts address different audience groups, from frequent concertgoers to youth and cultural tourists, tailoring communication to increase emotional resonance and relevance. Physical context also matters: venue accessibility and atmosphere significantly shape perceptions of classical music (Barlow & Shibli, 2007; Markusen & Brown, 2014). Finally, price is not always the decisive factor in engagement. While affordability is important, perceived value and emotional fulfillment more strongly influence participation (Beeching, 2020; Godin, 2018). As Godin (2018, p. 51) notes, people invest in experiences that feel "worth more than what [they] paid for." Personal branding, when executed with authenticity and care, can help ensure that classical music is among those valuable experiences.

4. Methodological Framework

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between classical music and its practitioners, with a specific focus on the concept of personal branding within the classical music industry. In particular, the research explored how personal branding functions in the context of democratisation, popularisation, and audience development in the digital age. The study addressed personal branding as a multifaceted phenomenon that intersects with the music itself (Bull & Scharff, 2021), musicians (Kang et al., 2022; Beeching, 2020), concert experiences (Markusen & Brown, 2014), audiences (Alnasser & Yi, 2023; Jiang, 2019; Cuenca-Amigo & Makua, 2017), behind-the-scenes professionals (Alessandri et al., 2020), and the broader digital

environment (Bergauer, 2024; Carboni, 2012). In doing so, the study aimed to deepen and contextualise previous research.

The research was guided by the following objectives:

RO1: To explore how different stakeholders perceive personal branding for themselves, their clients, and each other.

RO2: To investigate the role of social media in personal branding

RO3: To examine the relationship between personal branding and commercial success, including artist selection and media coverage.

RO4: To assess the contribution of personal branding to democratisation, popularisation, and audience development in classical music.

Accordingly, the study addressed four central research questions:

RQ1: How do stakeholders define personal branding and what are their attitudes towards it?

RQ2: What is the role of social media in personal branding?

RQ3: What is the correlation between personal branding and artist selection or career success?

RQ4: How can personal branding be used to promote democratisation, popularisation, and audience development in classical music?

The empirical data were collected through 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals from three key stakeholder groups: musicians, managers, and media representatives. Semi-structured interviews were selected due to their flexibility, allowing for a structured set of topics while enabling the researcher to adapt the phrasing, sequencing, and inclusion of follow-up questions based on participant responses (Lamza Posavec, 2004, p. 70). Question sets were tailored to the expertise of each group, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the four thematic areas. The full sample included: five musicians who were all under the age of 35 (one pianist – RP2, two cellists – RP3 and RP5, and two violinists – RP1 and RP4), two conductors (RP6 and RP7), two social media managers (RP5 and RP12), two festival managers (RP6 and RP9), three orchestra managers (RP8, RP10, and RP11), and five journalists or media editors (RP12–RP16). Among them, one conductor, one musician, one journalist, one social media manager, and all orchestra managers were female. Nationally, nine participants were Croatian, six were from other European countries, and one from the United States. Opera singers were excluded from the sample due to the distinct nature of opera, which includes both singing and acting, and the existence of agencies specifically representing opera performers. The participants were identified using purposive sampling based on their professional roles, career achievements, and public profiles, particularly their digital presence and activity on social media. Recruitment was conducted via email and social media, and participation was voluntary. Where possible, interviews were conducted in person;

otherwise, they were held via Google Meet or Zoom between December 2024 and April 2025. The interviews were transcribed using NotebookLM and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Thematic analysis enabled the identification, organisation, and interpretation of patterns across the dataset, while the analysis was conducted reflexively, with the researchers actively involved in interpretation rather than maintaining a purely neutral stance. To ensure confidentiality, participants were anonymised through codes (RP1–RP16) and identified only by role descriptions that do not compromise their anonymity.

The final sample included 16 participants, with partial overlap between categories: two individuals participated both as musicians and managers, and one as both manager and media professional. This resulted in seven musicians, seven managers, and five media representatives. The inclusion of both domestic and international participants, as well as varying levels of digital visibility, allowed for a nuanced exploration of perspectives within the classical music industry.

5. Results

The present study employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore personal branding practices within the classical music industry, drawing upon 16 semi-structured interviews with musicians, managers, and media professionals. The qualitative design allowed for a nuanced understanding of how personal branding is experienced, negotiated, and operationalized in an increasingly digitalized and market-driven cultural sector.

The analysis generated four overarching and interrelated themes: (1) Personal Branding as Identity Work; (2) The Ambivalent Role of Social Media; (3) Networks, Gatekeeping, and the Economy of Visibility; and (4) Audience Development as Both Education and Marketing Strategy. Together, these themes illuminate the multi-layered tensions between artistry, commerce, and digital mediation.

5.1. *Personal Branding as Identity Work*

Most musicians stated they see themselves as personal brands, and most knew what that would mean without prior explanations. Additionally, musicians realise their personal branding extends beyond the online world, and includes how they behave at work and in public.

RP1: *"Well, I think in general, the whole idea of personal branding didn't come immediately. For me to have a personal brand is mostly sharing what I'm doing. […] Building your personal branding around your artistic figure, profile, could serve you as a trampoline to sell master classes, teaching and everything. It is another way of targeting the audience."*
RP2: *"I have to be, unfortunately. It's the only way. For me, a personal brand means I have to recognise what I want to present about myself to others, what makes*

me special, perhaps, where I feel good and comfortable, including the programme, how and where I will present myself, and social media."
RP4: *"Do I see myself as a personal brand? In the amount that I have to be, yes."*
RP7: *"I have realised that you kind of have a personal brand whether you want it or not, if you are working as a musician. It is not just your social media account, but also how you present yourself at work and in public. So, of course, it's important to also think about it and prioritise it."*
RP11: *"For soloists, personal brand is already so important for success, particularly when trying to reach and develop new audiences. Anna Lapwood is a brilliant example of an artist who has created a personal brand and, as a result, is having enormous success. Her content is a perfect balance of relatable and aspirational – connecting with audiences on a human level and as a result, creating interest in her as a person and what she does."*
RP15*: "Given that classical music is extremely personalised, focused on the individual and their exceptional skill [...], the shaping of personality or personal branding is an intrinsic quality of classical music today, as it has been for centuries."*
RP16: *"I see personal branding as something with a particularly interesting application in the field of classical music. Because classical music is inherently quite a niche field."*

Besides selling the music and their interpretation, musicians are also selling themselves. This is also due to their interpretations being immensely interconnected with them as people outside of music. In fact, their private lives are tightly connected to their professions, so, in a sense, they live their work.

RP1: *"My personal identity and my professional persona are not so different. […] If you're a content creator, you are basically selling a product for free. […] The boundaries are different to anybody, and I strongly believe you should have boundaries between your personal and professional life, because that's a job."*
RP2: *"Every one of us needs to imagine themselves as a product in a way. I am a product, but also the CEO and the salesman. We have to do all of that."*
RP3: *"My personal life is somewhat also connected to music, especially because I come from a musical family."*
RP4: *"You are selling yourself, whatever you do. It is inevitable that I will be a product, because I am on the programme booklet and on the poster. My name is in big letters."*

In addition to this, the response to this topic was in the majority positive, because many interlocutors see it as a needed topic, especially in the digitalised world where

one cannot avoid social media, but many institutions and professionals have not yet integrated it successfully into their work. In other words, it is not just the research and theory that is lacking, but there are also not enough professionals in the field of arts management, especially ones, as one interlocutor noted, with strong networks.

RP12: *"There are not enough people who are skilled in this area. You know, they might not know how to do different things, which is fine, but to really put the correct personal brand together at large, I think there are people that really lack that skill."*
RP14*: "We have a very underdeveloped cultural scene. [...] Quite simply, we aren't a desirable concert destination. [...] In Croatia, there isn't a figure in classical music influential enough to support major projects."*

Going further, the interlocutors see that audiences often have a distorted view of careers in classical music, and agree that is something worthy of talking about and that the narrative needs to be changed.

RP2: *"You do not have to be perfect. When I go to a concert and some big pianist messes up, I am actually glad because, like, you are also a person."*
RP4: *" I had so many negative experiences, […] it is all filled with crises, depression episodes, physiological issues and injuries, psychological problems, and an abnormal quantity of dissatisfaction. […] It's a topic that needs to be discussed a lot more, what a career in classical music actually is and how much of a distorted concept it is."*
RP5: *"A lot of the behind-the-scenes and practical things about being a classical musician are interesting for the audience because it's a very different kind of lifestyle."*

5.2. *The Ambivalent Role of Social Media*

Social media is not the only tool for personal branding, but it is one of the easiest to navigate. However, even though musicians realise the importance and necessity of personal branding, and utilising social media to further promote themselves, most of them are uncomfortable with it. Additionally, they are reluctant to post videos of themselves playing because of their self-criticism. In other words, most musicians, albeit they know they do not have to "perfect", prefer using social media to only post content that presents them in the best light.

RP2: *"I think it's important to just realise it is what it is, and that it has nothing to do with being cringe. You are building your image via social media. So, one should not take it as personally and overthink it too much. Because, I do overthink it at times and think 'I don't want to post this, it's not good enough'. I just feel uncomfortable at times but actually one should not be uncomfortable because it is just how it is."*
RP5: *"Musicians have been trained to be, you know, respectable, look good, be professional. So, they would rather show something super polished, edited, scripted,*

perfect, sound engineered, and that they can professionally stand behind. But, on social media often these kinds of posts fall really flat because people see it as sort of an ad or something that's not super genuine."

RP16: *"While building a strong personal brand using different tools can very much help a burgeoning musician's career and help them attain a bigger and more diverse following, at the end of the day an overreliance on social media can also alienate classical music's core audience, and as such I believe it necessary for there to be a balance."*

Taking a step back, the most used social media among musicians are Instagram and YouTube. Even though media and festival representatives said they also find new musicians through social media such as Instagram, they added that they primarily check platforms like Spotify and Apple Music, or go to concerts when they have the time. Nonetheless, all managers, orchestra and festival representatives, said they look at musician's digital footprint, including social media, before booking them. Therefore, managers are adamant that using social media as a personal branding tool can help artists advance their careers, and that they should post their playing, and show their personalities.

RP3: *"I don't really see Instagram as something where a person should promote themselves. If you're really, really successful, then okay. But Instagram is more for connecting with each other for me than just promotion."*

RP5: *"What I had done or I was lucky with was that I had a large connection of musicians around Europe because I've lived in several countries and then starting my Instagram was quite easy because I had already made those connections and then from those connections I got more connections and more connections and more connections and I think musicians often have been to student exchanges or worked or studied abroad. So they actually already have a network that they could capitalize on Instagram or TikTok."*

RP12: *"A lot of it is social driven. A lot of it also is, you know, just who's performing in New York. If I am seeing people at Carnegie Hall, they're on my radar now. […] I follow a lot of the record labels and so by the record label signing an artist and doing a big project with them that also often times gets an artist on my radar. […] I went into Apple Music Classical last night. It was after work and I was like let me see what's new."*

Moving along, most musicians were contacted with various opportunities, including concert and competition invites, through and based on their social media accounts.

RP7: *"I noticed a few years ago [...] I usually got contacted for a new project after posting. And when I realised it was not just a coincidence, but that the reason I got contacted was that they saw me on Instagram or Facebook. [...] So it's not 'only social*

media', but it definitely helps in being visible so the right people remember you. And you can show off stuff you do, and also show more about who you are."

Moreover, one point that was emphasised with all groups was that numbers do not equal success, career satisfaction, nor number of people willing to come to concerts. At the end of the day, it is important to have an engaged following, which is hard to build.

RP2: *"You can present yourself to a wider audience. Of course, it's better if you have 15.000 followers than when you have 500 followers. […] Let's say I post that I'm playing a concert somewhere and people see it and come to the concert. But you know, often that number is just a number."*

RP5: *"You can have 100.000 people following you and then you have a concert and 20 people show up."*

Likewise, they touched upon the process and the importance of crafting the (social media) image.

RP2: *"Mainly you're crafting your image. You have to figure out how you're going to present yourself, how you're going to envision your programme, what frameworks you'll operate within, and what frameworks you'll step outside of."*

RP5: *"I wish it would all be about how well you play your instrument. […] Everybody plays super well. It's about how you work with others, how you communicate with others, how other people find it working with you. One way to communicate this to everybody is to show it on social media."*

RP6: *"The quality is not as important as the brand is anymore."*

RP16: *"Social media is a powerful tool because it helps to present other facets of oneself outside of their career, which also helps to make them stand out amid the competition."*

However, most participants agreed social media and especially algorithms could undeservingly boost a person's career.

RP15: *"Of course. It is because the media image is, in fact, a created image and can be manipulated. More precisely, media image is shaped."*

Playing well is not enough if no one hears it, social media enables international visibility. A musician's brand can help secure concerts and attract audiences, making relationship-building with both online and offline audiences essential. It's not necessary to be on every platform; focusing on one and using it consistently is often more effective. Content creation becomes easier with practice, and developing it as a habit is key to long-term engagement.

5.3. *Networks, Gatekeeping, and the Visibility*

The managerial and partly the media side stated that having soloists or conductors with a strong personal brand can also help them get more attention and sell more tickets/issues, therefore highlighting the two-way relationship and the benefits on both sides. On that note, a prominent aspect of building a personal brand is the network.

RP12: *"Once you have a community, you can monetise it."*
RP15: *"Publicity through media means public interest and public interest ultimately means ticket sales for concerts."*

Thus, musicians stated they do competitions as a way to expand their networks, meet managers and festival organisers, and therefore book more concerts. Indeed, the managerial side agreed some concerts are booked through competitions, or at least positive word-of-mouth in connection with seeing and hearing musicians at such events. However, sometimes, organisers do book musicians based on their concert proposal sent via email. With this, having in mind that not all get the same number of emails, and because musicians are actively seeking gigs and opportunities to perform, festivals and organisers still tend to get way more concert inquiries than they need. From the musicians' side, this tends to be seen as tedious work, but they accept it as part of their careers. Beyond that, even successful musicians who have won numerous international competitions, and have a lot of networks behind them, including successful parents in music, often depend on sending emails to book concerts.

RP1: *"Winning 'big ones' [competitions] could lead to managers contacting you for a solo career."*
RP2: *"You have to be aware that very few of those [e-mail] offers will ultimately succeed, but it's important that you send them. […] The best outcome of all of that would actually be if I find some contact of an organiser through it."*
RP6: *"It's partly through acquaintances. Partly recommendations from certain people. Partly people just reach out to us. And then we kind of look at it – is the program interesting to us?"*
RP9: *"The program is dictated by the theme of the cycle. […] The physical venue itself determines what can be performed."*

In addition to that, media journalists and editors agree personal branding can help musicians be noticed and therefore get concert reviews. Likewise, some stated that what might get them to come to concerts are the performers, as well as the programme. Regarding this, they choose which performances to feature partly on their preferences, and partly on what they feel the audience might want to read about. Albeit, being aware of their potential influence on someone's career, music critics said they do not judge young musicians as harshly.

RP13: *"I never cut anyone down, particularly not young performers, as they need to be given an opportunity. Simply stepping onto the stage is a significant achievement. [...] One must have the courage to face an audience, and therefore, I would never offer negative criticism to young individuals but perhaps draw their attention to a technical aspect. And to be frank, if something truly doesn't appeal to me, I prefer not to write about it."*
RP14: *"Always go in favour, as they say, never trample a priori."*
RP15: *"Given that the classical music scene in Croatia is relatively limited and not particularly commercialized, we can fully adhere to artistic criteria."*

Furthermore, artists see themselves as mediators between the music and the audience. This notion is something the managerial side does not necessarily agree with, explaining:

RP4: *"I like when they say 'the concert was nice, I enjoyed the music', not me."*
RP5: *"People don't go to a concert because somebody is playing Mozart. People are going to the concert because that somebody, that person, is playing Mozart. They could be playing anything; they could just be standing there. Yuja Wang would probably sell out stadiums every night for a week if she just stood there."*

The time one devotes to building a personal brand often depends on their goals. For instance, musicians with steady jobs in orchestras or education may feel less pressure to promote themselves due to financial stability. Many orchestra members also pursue solo or chamber careers. As orchestra managers observe, orchestras consist of distinct individuals, and audiences increasingly seek personal connections with musicians. Personal branding can enhance ticket sales, so managers leverage not only guest artists but also the orchestra's own members to engage audiences. The orchestra's credibility supports the individual musician, and vice versa, as some fans attend concerts to see specific performers. Innovative projects can further spark creativity and reinforce both the orchestra's and musicians' brands. This research includes interviews with orchestra communication professionals to offer insights from behind the scenes.

RP8: *"Musical skill, the craft still forms the basis of any recruitment process within the orchestra. That being said, once you've entered an orchestra and built your career, once you're starting to have the calling and the motivation to become a soloist then building an online brand for yourself becomes of prime importance because you're going to become visible. […] A digital presence is paramount and can be a great catalyst."*
RP10: *"In our case, it is not true that the audience does not exist because we work on the programme, communications and campaigns, activities and actions aimed at ensuring a wider audience knows what we do. […] The careers of our musicians as*

soloists and orchestra musicians are tightly interconnected. Their personal brands and the orchestra brand are complement."

5.4. *Audience Development as Both Education and Marketing Strategy*

All participants believe social media can aid the democratisation of classical music. Furthermore, as was discussed, strong personal brands can attract more people to come to concerts. Alongside this, musicians and managers realise the potential of taking photos and recordings for further enhancement of the musician's network and career. Mostly they do not mind it, under the condition it does not hinder other people's concert experience. Likewise, some find it distracting if someone takes photos or videos with flash on, if the recorded videos play automatically, or even if the official photographer walks around a lot. Concerning this, interlocutors explained:

RP1: *"I understand it's an experience, though I don't know. I mean, for example, if you think of a pop concert like Coldplay, it's a crazy concert. It's so beautiful that it got more and more viral thanks to people recording it. So, they got more dates, they got more concerts just because people were posting it. In a way, it helps a lot. It helps as well if you post it, you know. I don't know. It's controversial."*
RP2: *"The event is special in itself, and then, to me, it is much more important that it succeeds, rather than it is well-presented later."*
RP6: *"From a personal standpoint, I am against it. Not because of our concerts, but generally, I am against it and think it's wrong, and that, at the end of the day, the concert is a unique experience. I mean, why do people come to concerts if everything is on YouTube? Because it's different, and cannot be compared."*

However, even though it is partly true that it is not about the programme, but who is performing, the programme is still an important part of every concert and is, therefore, carefully curated. On the topic of concert programming, interlocutors stated they believe it is needed to think about the audience of the programme:

RP1: *"I mean you have to do a compromise obviously sometimes. […] For example, of course, the market would choose a Baroque composer."*
RP2: *"My objective is that the audience enjoys the concert and that they come again, not for them to leave with question marks above their heads thinking what did they just hear?"*
RP3: *"We used to have [orchestra] concerts where the program was such that, you know, even I wouldn't have come to that concert because nothing was known. Like some Polish composer that nobody has heard of, not even us. Maybe it sounds good, but the audience won't come to that. […] They won't come for a guy named Kilar, but they will come for a guy named Bach."*

On that topic, interlocutors, especially musicians, feel a responsibility and want to educate audiences on classical music and their concert programming and think of audience development as part of their careers.

RP2: *"I think you have to do something because just abstractly listening to classical music... some will like it, some won't. But if you talk more about classical music as a world of certain ideas and what I wanted to explore with it, then maybe someone will get a better picture of it. [...] When you talk before the concert, before playing, that's great. [...] First, you connect with the audience at the beginning, you already have some contact. It's not like 'I'm here, you're there', but you're already in some kind of collaboration from the start, and you can explain something more closely: what to pay attention to, how the piece came about. You have to be careful with that too, though."*
RP4: *"It's necessary. At my next concert, I will stand and just introduce myself to the audience, and then I'll explain each composition to them. […] People need to be told that this is not a discipline that necessarily requires knowledge. Although, knowledge provides you with a different perspective that is equally noble."*
RP6 : *"I think it is important. […] We are professional musicians and we have to know what is good for that audience and we have to know how to educate it further."*
RP7: *"Yeah I do. But it's something I really want to do as well. And I have so much content that I want to share. But that's usually content that takes more effort and time. So unfortunately I don't have the time, and just post something 'fun and easy' instead. But actually, I usually get more likes and visibility on fun and easy content, than the more educational ones."*
RP10: *"Anyone can be expected to sit in our audience. And that is important."*
RP14 : "Broadening the audience's horizons is necessary, but not in a way that prevents you from attracting them with the very content intended to do so."

Moving on, social media content brings musicians closer to the audience, which might in return get people to either come to concerts or start supporting certain musicians more:

RP7: *"Have fun and try to be real and show your personality. It seems like that is what people want more and more now on social media. Real people doing real stuff. No matter what you actually do. They just want to connect with YOU."*
RP8: *"It is our priority to humanise our musicians, to humanise the house, to humanise classical music. And likewise, our visual identity is focused more and more on people, on the human side of things."*

Finally, in the age of social media, extensive advertising, and more stimuli than ever before, it is the question of adaptability and authenticity. On the topic of having

engaged audiences and expanding the efforts in non-traditional promotion, interlocutors explained:

RP1: *"You have to be interesting and the more people follow you the more jobs you get."*
RP3: *"To break through […] you need to have good marketing."*
RP4: *"Promotion-wise, [...] it is a lot of manual labour."*
RP5: *"We don't need to change the product. Like music in itself, it's already good, but we just can't keep on doing the marketing for the 70/80-year-old people who come there anyway."*
RP8: *"Marketing is more and more nowadays about building trust, building relationships and telling stories."*
RP10: *"What we are doing with concerts for babies, we don't expect they will buy tickets in 10 years, but we are de facto communicating with their parents."*
RP11: *"If orchestral musicians were to take a similar approach [creating a strong personal brand], this could be a great thing for orchestras. Musicians would create their own followings who, in turn, would want to come to see them perform with the orchestra. At the [Orchestra name], we're already starting to think about how to spotlight our players as individuals with an aim to generate more interest in and, one day, fandom of the Orchestra."*
RP12: *"The podcast is not necessarily something that makes money directly, but by building awareness around a subject matter that's mutually beneficial and shared by a lot of people you then generate eyeballs on your work."*

Conclusion

Although personal branding as a concept predates modernity, its current form, shaped by digital media, personal channels, and audience interactivity, reflects the technological and cultural shifts of the late 20th and early 21st century. This study explored personal branding in the classical music industry, focusing on how stakeholders define, experience, and operationalize it; how social media mediate personal visibility; how branding relates to career success; and how it may contribute to the democratisation, popularisation, and audience development of classical music.

Findings reveal that classical musicians generally perceive themselves as personal brands, though most lack systematic training in brand management. Nevertheless, many display intuitive marketing awareness, employing terms such as "word-of-mouth," "engagement," and "reach." Several interviewees have developed proactive branding strategies, founding festivals, launching personal hashtags, creating PR

agencies, or producing podcasts, demonstrating how entrepreneurial initiatives become intertwined with personal branding. Managers and media professionals generally exhibited greater expertise, often guiding musicians in navigating digital media and audience engagement. Across all groups, personal branding was consistently seen as a positive career asset, necessary for differentiation in an increasingly saturated and competitive field. Social media occupy a central yet ambivalent position in these practices. They serve as vital tools for audience-building, visibility, and career advancement, but many musicians experience discomfort, perfectionism, and fear of criticism when posting performance content. This ambivalence underscores the tension between musicians' trained emphasis on artistic perfection and the informal, often unpolished aesthetic favored by online audiences. Managers strongly emphasized that a consistent and strategic online presence directly affects career trajectories and booking decisions. Traditional media, while still influential, are perceived as having diminished importance due to reduced coverage of arts and culture, further reinforcing the need for self-controlled digital platforms where musicians curate their own public narratives. Beyond technical proficiency, personal branding shapes career outcomes by influencing both gatekeeping processes and audience relationships. Musicians face numerous additional demands, networking, self-promotion, legal and contractual knowledge, programming, and audience management, that are often experienced as burdensome. While some musicians benefit from family connections or pre-existing networks, all emphasized the growing significance of building and maintaining professional communities. Orchestra managers confirmed that strong personal brands not only benefit soloists but contribute to institutional visibility, ticket sales, and audience engagement, illustrating a reciprocal relationship between individual and organizational branding. Importantly, personal branding is not solely a career management tool but intersects directly with audience development and the broader democratisation of classical music. Audiences increasingly value authenticity and personal connection, challenging traditional models of promotion and advertising. Participants recognized that branding efforts, while rooted in marketing logics of exchange and visibility, must balance financial imperatives with community-building and reputation management. Persistent perceptions of elitism, exclusivity, and intellectual inaccessibility remain barriers to broader audience participation. Musicians and organizations are experimenting with educational programming, pre-concert talks, diverse concert formats, and free outdoor events to make classical music more accessible and relatable. Yet, the enduring challenge lies in converting occasional or informal engagement into long-term concert attendance and audience loyalty. Therefore, as this study demonstrates, personal branding has become an integral dimension of classical music careers in the digital era. It requires musicians to combine their artistic identity with carefully curated self-presentation across multiple platforms, a process that demands skills not traditionally part of musical training. While this can strengthen career prospects and audience ties, it also diverts time and energy from core artistic work. Nevertheless, interview data and existing literature suggest that personal branding has become indispensable: musical excellence alone no longer guarantees

success. At the same time, this study contributes to broader media studies debates on self-representation, platform labor, and visibility in digitalized cultural industries. It highlights how professional visibility is negotiated not only through institutional gatekeeping but also through the individual's ability to navigate platform logics, audience expectations, and algorithmic visibility. Several limitations should be acknowledged. As a qualitative study based on purposive sampling, findings reflect the perspectives of a relatively young, primarily European and Croatian cohort of participants. Challenges in securing interview participation further narrowed the sample, and perspectives from older or more globally established professionals remain underrepresented. Topics such as gender imbalance, elitism, nepotism, and mental health, which emerged throughout the interviews, deserve dedicated future research attention. Moreover, this study focused on industry professionals; future studies would benefit from incorporating audience perspectives to deepen understanding of how personal branding influences audience behaviours and expectations. Despite these limitations, this research offers practical guidelines for musicians, managers, and media professionals seeking to build and manage personal brands, shape artist selection processes, and navigate evolving media environments. Ultimately, no formula guarantees success. Yet, a common recommendation from both scholarly literature and interviewees alike remains: to begin, to start from one's current position, make deliberate efforts, and adapt progressively. Musicians, by their very training, possess the persistence such efforts require. As brands invest heavily in creating emotional connections, musicians inherently possess what audiences ultimately seek: authentic, personal engagement. Personal branding thus emerges not merely as career strategy but as a tool for fostering deeper human connections between artists and their audiences.

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