

Nordic AI Meet 2026

O5. AI in Culture & Creativity (Thu 11:15-12:15)

3. Output not input: social preconditions of commercial AI generated music with respect to genre, the case of Icelandic music

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Abstract: Generative systems trained on recorded music catalogues are now a live dispute in the Icelandic music industry. I ask: what had to exist before such generative systems were possible?

Much of the controversy surrounding generative music is, arguably, extramusical i.e. it plays out as legal deliberation, aesthetic and ethical dispute, and ideological conflict over the position of music qua culture. Less remarked on is the strange epistemic position these models actually occupy, which is at the intersection of the musical and the extramusical rather than cleanly inside either. Musical practice produces the object models ingest i.e. a recorded sound. Musical sound becomes statistically legible only because it had already been extramusically sorted into genre and attached to tags by an apparatus with no interest in modelling the audio itself. The dispute's own vocabulary, then, is not commentary running alongside the technical question; it is really a condition of the technical question.

The Icelandic state's first comprehensive music policy describes recorded catalogues as assets to be marketed and preserved; however, there is conspicuously no conception of it as a corpus to be ingested nor any mention of artificial intelligence.

What statistical generation requires is not only a corpus of recordings but a corpus that has already been described. The load-bearing precondition is a description layer i.e. an apparatus that had already sorted recordings into named genres and attached the names to the sound, for reasons of routing rather than production.

The Icelandic catalogue was made statistically legible twice over, for reasons unrelated to machine learning. An export apparatus required a recognisable national sound, stabilising a shared style at the point of reception rather than production. A journalist coined *krútt* as a stylistic/cultural category in the beginning of the 2000s; by 2015 the description had become a sort of ground truth for commercial Icelandic music. Separately, STEF's registration regime made accurate machine-readable cataloguing the condition of being paid at all. Legibility therefore was both a market and an administrative requirement decades before it was used for model training.

Whether the statistical coherence these systems reproduce belongs to musical practice or to the categories through which it has been described is an important question. Musical style is treated overwhelmingly as input, when in actuality it is the output of a dynamic musical practice which only gets crystallised into a fixed snapshot of genre after the fact. That 'Icelandic music' can be reproduced by these systems at all depends less on the modelling than on the cataloguing that preceded it, the export apparatus already having done the sorting the model only had to learn, and in this sense the entire commercial music practice is implicated