Chapter 4

Conservative Reason in Music: A Thought Experiment on Instrumental and Value Rationality

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Abstract

This chapter develops a conceptual framework for evaluating musical practices that are often described as "conservative," including the continued circulation of canonical repertories, the preservation of inherited pedagogies, resistance to changing evaluative standards, and programming habits that privilege a narrow set of works and composers. Rather than locating conservatism on a simple progressive–reactionary axis, the chapter distinguishes between two different levels of justification: the rationality of the means by which a practice operates and the rationality of the end that the practice serves. Drawing on Max Weber's distinction between Zweckrationalität and Wertrationalität, I propose a two-plane vocabulary that separates instrumental rationality in action from value rationality of the goal. This distinction clarifies how a practice can be strategically effective while normatively weak, or normatively defensible while poorly implemented. The framework is then applied to two major sites in which musical conservatism emerges: institutions such as conservatories, orchestras, festivals, and archives, and platform-mediated music distribution, where recommendation systems and playlist curation can generate a form of invisible conservatism through popularity bias, retention metrics, and opaque selection procedures. The chapter concludes by defending "critical continuity" as a position that takes the epistemic and social functions of tradition seriously while refusing to exempt inherited practices from public justification, revision, and contestation.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary musical discourse, the term conservative is frequently used as a criticism before it is used as a description. An orchestra that repeatedly programs canonical symphonies, a conservatory that preserves a strongly lineage-based pedagogy, a jury that rewards stylistic correctness over experimentation, or a streaming platform that continuously returns listeners to the already familiar may all be called conservative. Yet the charge often does more rhetorical than analytic work. It commonly presupposes that continuity is intellectually suspect, that novelty carries presumptive value, and that inherited musical practices survive only because institutions resist change. Such assumptions are understandable in settings where exclusion, hierarchy, and gatekeeping are real concerns. Still, they do not by themselves settle the question of whether a given practice is irrational, unjustified, or merely continuous.

The central problem of this chapter is therefore not whether musical life contains conservative tendencies. It obviously does. The more difficult question is how such tendencies should be evaluated. A practice may preserve a tradition because that tradition stores forms of tacit knowledge, shared memory, and technical discipline that are not easily reconstructed from first principles. It may also preserve that same tradition because institutional actors confuse inherited prestige with self-evident value, or because they benefit from a stable system of recognition that privileges familiar works and recognized authorities. Conversely, a practice that presents itself as innovative may be normatively thin and organizationally routine, reproducing conventional market preferences under the language of disruption. The opposition between conservative and progressive, by itself, therefore explains very little.

This chapter argues that the evaluation of conservative reason in music becomes sharper once two questions are kept strictly separate. The first concerns the adequacy of means: do the actions, procedures, and institutional arrangements in question actually serve the stated aim? The second concerns the status of the aim itself: is the end being pursued normatively defensible, and can it be publicly justified? These questions are often collapsed in debate. Practices are denounced as conservative when the real objection is that their ends are exclusionary, while other practices are celebrated as progressive even when their means are ineffective or their goals remain undefined. A better vocabulary is needed.

To construct that vocabulary, I draw on Max Weber's distinction between Zweckrationalität and Wertrationalität (Weber, 1978). Rather than treating these as mutually exclusive "types" that directly classify musical institutions,

I use them as a way of distinguishing two planes on which practices can be assessed: instrumental rationality in action and value rationality of the goal. This yields a fourfold matrix. A practice may be rational on both dimensions, rational in its means but weak in its ends, defensible in its ends but ineffective in its means, or weak on both. Once this distinction is made, the category conservative becomes more precise. It no longer denotes a generic attitude toward the past. It names a family of practices whose justificatory structure must be examined.

The argument is conceptual rather than empirical. It does not offer survey data or ethnographic fieldwork. Instead, it proceeds through ideal-typical reasoning in a Weberian sense, drawing on social theory, philosophy, and scholarship on canon formation and platform governance in order to clarify the logical forms of justification that appear in musical life (Weber, 1978). The examples are drawn primarily from Western art music institutions and contemporary streaming environments, not because other musical worlds are irrelevant, but because these sites make the issues especially visible. Even so, the underlying framework is broader. It can also illuminate debates about sacred music, folk transmission, conservatism in popular music scenes, and the protective continuity of minoritized traditions.

Three premises that regularly structure arguments about musical conservatism must be stated openly at the outset. The first is the claim that innovation is inherently progressive. The second is the claim that continuity is an absence of thought, rather than a possible outcome of reflection, prudence, or inherited craft. The third is the claim that canons and repertorial hierarchies simply track excellence. None of these premises is self-validating. Innovation may be commercially driven and aesthetically shallow. Continuity may be critical, self-aware, and socially necessary. Canons may preserve genuine achievements while also sedimenting unequal access to recognition. The task, then, is neither to defend conservatism as such nor to dismiss it in advance, but to specify under what conditions continuity in music is rational, irrational, or only apparently rational.

2. Conservative Reason as an Analytical Problem

Before conservative musical practices can be evaluated, the term conservative itself must be disambiguated. In ordinary usage, it can refer to at least three different things. First, it can name a descriptive orientation toward inherited materials: repertories that remain stable across generations, pedagogies that preserve lineage, institutions that prefer continuity over disruption. Second, it can denote a normative preference for preservation, often grounded in claims

about excellence, discipline, or civilizational memory. Third, it can function polemically as a label for any practice judged insufficiently responsive to current aesthetic, social, or political demands. These meanings often overlap, but they should not be conflated. A practice may be descriptively conservative without being normatively reactionary; another may present itself as progressive while stabilizing conventional tastes through other means.

This distinction matters because musical institutions do not merely preserve or reject the past. They actively select from it. Raymond Williams (1977) called this process "selective tradition": a culture does not inherit everything equally but organizes memory through choices about what is retained, valorized, taught, and performed. Music makes this especially clear. No institution can transmit the totality of available repertories, techniques, genres, or historical practices. Selection is unavoidable because time, attention, rehearsal capacity, funding, and cognitive bandwidth are finite. The existence of selection, however, does not tell us which selections are justified. It only tells us that someone, somewhere, is deciding what counts as central.

Once conservatism is understood as a problem of selection rather than mere age, the analytic terrain changes. What appears as neutral preservation may in fact be a structured preference for some forms of value over others: compositional complexity over communal participation, fixity over improvisation, legibility over experimentation, prestige over access, or institutional solvency over aesthetic risk. None of these trade-offs can be evaluated without first clarifying the relevant aim. A conservatory designed primarily to train orchestral players will rationally organize its curriculum differently from a department devoted to broad musical literacy, creative practice, or community engagement. The same institutional behavior may therefore be justified in one setting and unjustified in another.

The concept of conservative reason is useful here because it shifts attention from the superficial contrast between old and new to the reasons given for continuity. A "conservative" institution is not simply one that performs old music, uses inherited techniques, or defends a canon. Many avant-garde institutions are conservative in practice when they repeatedly consecrate the same limited set of modernist legitimations. Likewise, some traditional communities are not conservative in any pejorative sense when they preserve a repertoire because doing so protects a vulnerable cultural memory or a threatened linguistic world. The relevant question is never merely whether a practice maintains continuity. It is what kind of continuity is being maintained, for whom, at what cost, and with what justificatory structure.

Three recurrent confusions distort this inquiry. The first is to equate novelty with emancipation. In commercial music ecosystems, novelty is often a sales rhythm rather than a critical achievement. The rapid turnover of tracks, playlists, or fashionable microgenres may intensify conformity rather than reduce it. The second confusion is to treat continuity as the opposite of reason. That assumption ignores the possibility that continuity may preserve tacit knowledge, tested procedures, and forms of coordination whose value becomes visible only when they are lost. The third confusion is to assume that the canon transparently records merit. In practice, canons are historical outcomes of institutional repetition, pedagogical selection, publication, criticism, and prestige accumulation. They can contain extraordinary works and exclusionary logics at the same time (Citron, 1993; Goehr, 1992).

Because these confusions are common, criticism of conservatism often misses its real object. What is objectionable in many musical institutions is not that they remember, preserve, or stabilize, but that they fail to justify why certain memories, lineages, and stabilizations deserve continued privilege. Conversely, defenders of tradition often weaken their own case by appealing to continuity alone. "This is how it has always been done" may explain why a practice exists, but it does not yet justify why it should continue. A more precise framework must therefore separate the efficacy of a practice from the legitimacy of its goal.

3. Weber, Means, Ends, and Musical Action

Max Weber's action theory offers a productive starting point for building such a framework. Weber distinguishes between Zweckrationalität, action oriented toward the calculated selection of means in relation to anticipated consequences, and Wertrationalität, action oriented toward a value regarded as intrinsically binding, irrespective of success or outcome (Weber, 1978). Later social theory, including Parsons's action framework, helped institutionalize Weber's importance for thinking about the structure of social action, even when it reworked his categories in different directions (Parsons, 1949). For present purposes, however, the historical exegesis is less important than the conceptual leverage these terms provide.

In discussions of music, Weber's distinction is often left at a high level of abstraction. It is more useful if it is operationalized into two analytically separate questions. The first is instrumental rationality in action: given a stated aim, are the chosen means coherent, effective, and likely to generate the intended result? The second is value rationality of the goal: is the aim itself grounded in explicit normative reasons that can be defended, criticized, and

revised? This translation is not identical with Weber's original typology, but it remains faithful to the basic insight that practices can be justified by different kinds of reasons. A conservatory may be highly effective at reproducing a tradition, while the value of reproducing that exact tradition remains underargued. A platform may be technologically excellent at holding user attention, while the cultural goal implied by its design remains normatively impoverished.

Two clarifications are important. First, instrumental rationality and value rationality are not mutually exclusive. A practice can satisfy both. Indeed, many of the best institutional arrangements do exactly that: they pursue clearly articulated cultural or pedagogical goals through procedures designed to realize those goals effectively. Second, neither dimension can be inferred from the other. Efficient means do not vindicate an end. Equally, admirable ends do not guarantee competent implementation. This simple point is routinely ignored in debates about musical value, where moral approval of an aim can mask organizational weakness, and organizational success can mask normative emptiness.

Once these dimensions are separated, a fourfold matrix emerges, summarized in Table 1. In the first quadrant, a practice is high in value rationality and high in instrumental rationality. An example would be a conservatory or festival that explicitly aims to sustain shared musical literacy while also widening access to neglected works and underrepresented composers through stable procedures, curricular revision, commissioning structures, and transparent evaluative criteria. Here, continuity is not a refuge from justification; it is part of a publicly defensible cultural project. In the second quadrant, instrumental rationality is high but value rationality is low. A typical case would be season planning or digital curation optimized for ticket sales, engagement, or brand recognition without any serious defense of why those goals should dominate cultural decision-making. Such a system may function smoothly and predictably while narrowing aesthetic horizons.

In the third quadrant, value rationality is relatively high but instrumental rationality is weak. Institutions often arrive here when they adopt ambitious goals such as diversity, accessibility, or curricular renewal but fail to create the mechanisms required to realize them. Good intentions remain declarative, symbolic, or episodic. New works are programmed once without rehearsal investment; syllabus reform is announced without teacher training; access is proclaimed without changes to audition criteria or fee structures. Finally, in the fourth quadrant, both dimensions are weak. Practices in this zone persist out of inertia, prestige anxiety, imitation, or dogmatic repetition. Neither the

means nor the ends are well defended. The language of tradition functions merely as insulation against scrutiny.

The value of this matrix is diagnostic. It allows criticism to become more precise. When a practice is called conservative, one can ask: is the problem that its goal is unjustified, that its means are poor, or that both levels fail? Conversely, when a practice is defended in the name of continuity, one can ask whether what is being defended is a valuable good, a useful routine, or simply a protected hierarchy. This is also the point at which Habermas becomes relevant. The force of a normative claim does not arise from institutional repetition alone, but from its availability for public justification and criticism (Habermas, 1984). An institution that cannot state why its goals deserve allegiance is already weak on the value-rational plane, even if its procedures are efficient.

The distinction also clarifies a deeper sociological point. Musical institutions routinely convert contingent historical arrangements into apparently natural standards. A certain canon comes to appear inevitable; a particular mode of listening comes to seem universal; a narrow conception of technical mastery is treated as common sense. Once this naturalization occurs, means and ends collapse into one another. The procedure of preserving the canon is taken as proof that the canon deserves preservation. The circularity is rarely noticed because the institution experiences its own routines as reality itself. Weber's distinction breaks that circle. It reintroduces the question of ends, and with it the possibility that a practice can be successful by its own criteria while those criteria remain in need of justification.

Table 1. Combinations of instrumental rationality in action and value rationality of the goal.

	High value rationality of the goal	Low value rationality of the goal
High instrumental rationality in action	Maintaining a core repertory while systematically creating space for new works, neglected composers, and transparent revision.	Reducing programming or recommendation to familiar "hits" optimized for solvency, retention, or brand recognition.
Low instrumental rationality in action	Declaring diversity, access, or renewal as central goals but implementing them without criteria, infrastructure, or follow-through.	Arbitrary dogma: neither the ends nor the means are publicly justified.

Note. The examples are ideal-typical and meant to clarify analytic possibilities rather than classify specific institutions without further evidence.

4. Tradition, Tacit Knowledge, and the Justification of Continuity

One reason conservative musical practices cannot be dismissed wholesale is that traditions frequently carry knowledge that is difficult to formalize. Musical technique is not exhausted by explicit rules. Ensemble timing, phrasing, intonation, accompaniment sensitivity, stylistic inflection, craft habits, rehearsal etiquette, and even bodily comportment are often learned through apprenticeship, repetition, imitation, and correction rather than through fully codified propositions. In this respect, music offers a particularly vivid case of what Hayek (1945) described as the dispersion of socially relevant knowledge. Much of what matters in practice is local, embodied, and situational. It exists in people, routines, and institutions before it appears in manuals or curriculum documents.

This observation helps explain why traditions can have a rational core. A conservatory teacher who insists on certain scales, studies, fingering conventions, or repertorial sequences may not be defending the past merely because it is old. The teacher may be relying on a long-tested path through which students reliably acquire coordination, tone production, sight-reading discipline, or stylistic command. Edward Shils (1981) emphasized that tradition is not simply mechanical repetition; it is a chain of transmission through which a society hands down patterns judged worthy of preservation. Alasdair MacIntyre (1988) similarly argued that standards of rational judgment are often internal to practices and historically developed within traditions of inquiry rather than invented anew by isolated individuals. In music, this means that a tradition may preserve criteria for what counts as a good performance or adequate training in ways that are intelligible only from inside the practice.

Yet none of this establishes that any given tradition, simply as tradition, is normatively justified. The fact that continuity carries tacit knowledge does not show that the end served by continuity is good, fair, or immune to criticism. Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) idea of "invented tradition" remains decisive here: claims of continuity may be strategically organized to legitimize authority. A lineage may preserve real craft and a restrictive hierarchy at the same time. Pierre Bourdieu's account of cultural fields adds a further complication. Institutions do not merely recognize value; they help produce the very standards through which value is perceived, accumulating symbolic capital by presenting particular classifications as natural or universal (Bourdieu, 1993). What appears as inheritance may therefore also be a mechanism for stabilizing distinction.

This is especially clear in the history of Western art music. Lydia Goehr's (1992) analysis of the "work concept" shows how modern musical institutions

consolidated a specific understanding of what a musical work is and how it should be treated. That understanding, in turn, shaped concert life, pedagogy, archival practice, and evaluation. The canon that emerges from such a structure is not merely a sedimentation of excellence. It is a historically specific selection regime. Marcia Citron (1993) demonstrates that canon formation has also been entangled with gendered exclusions. Thus, when an institution says it is preserving tradition, one must ask whether it is preserving a repertoire because of pedagogical utility, historical literacy, and aesthetic richness, or because it is reproducing a socially familiar hierarchy under the sign of excellence.

Raymond Williams's (1977) notion of selective tradition sharpens this point. Tradition is never the total past; it is a filtered past. Some works are continually reactivated, edited, published, taught, and funded, while others remain inaccessible or legible only to specialists. To defend tradition, then, is already to defend selection. The rationality of that defense depends on whether the reasons for selection are explicit and whether the process remains open to revision. Otherwise, appeals to tradition simply convert historical success into present entitlement.

It is also important not to assume that conservatism always protects dominant groups. In some musical contexts, continuity serves the survival of threatened practices: liturgical repertoires endangered by secularization, local traditions under pressure from national standardization, or minority-language songs displaced by platform logics favoring dominant languages. In such cases, conserving a tradition may have high value rationality because it protects plural memory, cultural autonomy, or communal continuity. But even here, critical questions remain necessary. Who speaks for the tradition? Who is authorized to define authenticity? When does protection become policing? A tradition may be worth preserving while still requiring internal debate about gender, class, or generational authority.

The crucial distinction, then, is between conserving conditions of intelligibility and conserving particular power distributions. A musical world can rationally preserve techniques, reference points, and historical memory without treating every inherited hierarchy as sacred. Critical evaluation should not begin from the crude premise that continuity equals irrationality. It should begin from the more difficult question of what exactly is being conserved: knowledge, memory, coordination, prestige, exclusivity, or some unstable combination of them.

5. Canon, Repertory, and the Is–Ought Problem

Debates about canon and repertory often fail because they move too quickly from descriptive centrality to normative authority. David Hume's is–ought distinction remains a decisive warning here: no statement about what has been valued, preserved, or admired entails by itself a conclusion about what ought to continue to be valued (Hume, 1978). G. E. Moore's critique of the naturalistic fallacy extends the point. The good cannot be straightforwardly identified with some natural or historical property such as longevity, popularity, or institutional prestige (Moore, 1903). In musical discourse, however, such slippages are common. A repertoire is described as central, enduring, or foundational, and these descriptive predicates are then quietly converted into normative obligations.

This conversion is intellectually weak but institutionally powerful. Conservatories have limited time. Orchestras have limited rehearsal budgets. Audiences have limited attention. Survey courses and examination systems require exemplars. Under these conditions, canons serve obvious coordinating functions. They reduce complexity, create shared references, and provide a manageable sequence of works through which students and listeners can orient themselves (Goehr, 1992). In that respect, a canon can be instrumentally rational. The mistake is to treat that coordinating function as sufficient proof of normative superiority. The fact that a repertory is useful for organizing teaching or programming does not establish that it deserves monopoly status.

The concept of quality is often where this mistake hides. Institutions routinely claim that they preserve the canon because it contains the "best" works, but the criteria behind this judgment are rarely unpacked. Does quality mean formal complexity, historical influence, pedagogical utility, emotional depth, performance challenge, innovation, cultural representativeness, durability of reception, or public recognizability? These are not identical standards. A work may be pedagogically central without being the highest achievement by every measure; another may be aesthetically exceptional while poorly suited to introductory teaching. Without explicit criteria, "quality" functions less as an argument than as a prestige marker. Bourdieu's (1993) sociology is relevant precisely because it shows how classifications masquerade as nature.

Citron's (1993) critique of canon formation makes the issue still sharper. Exclusion from a canon is not always the result of explicit denunciation. It can occur through more ordinary mechanisms: omission from syllabi, absence from editions, lack of funding, genre hierarchy, assumptions about seriousness, and repetition of received exemplars. Once these mechanisms stabilize, the canon appears self-evident. Those excluded from it are then judged peripheral

because they were historically denied the conditions under which centrality is produced. The canon is therefore not merely a record of past judgment; it is an active machine for reproducing future judgment.

None of this means that all canons are illegitimate or that institutions must abandon core repertories. The stronger conclusion is that canons require explicit normative articulation. If an institution maintains Beethoven, Bach, or the nineteenth-century symphonic tradition at the center of its curriculum or programming, it should say why. The answer may be that these works provide unmatched resources for teaching form, counterpoint, orchestration, large-scale listening, or interpretive discipline. Such reasons are intelligible. But once stated, they can also be compared against other goods: representational breadth, local cultural relevance, new creation, or the repair of historical neglect. This is where Habermas's (1984) emphasis on public justification becomes decisive. A canon may survive criticism, but it should not survive by refusing criticism.

The is–ought gap also explains why appeals to audience preference are insufficient. A season planner may say, accurately, that familiar repertory sells more tickets. But the conclusion "therefore familiar repertory ought to dominate the season" does not follow without an additional premise such as "maximizing ticket revenue is the primary good this institution should pursue." Publicly funded institutions, educational bodies, and civic festivals often cannot simply assume that premise. Their missions usually include education, stewardship, cultural plurality, and support for new work. If those ends matter, then purely market-based reasoning is normatively incomplete even when it is instrumentally sophisticated.

The most defensible position is neither the sanctification nor the abolition of the canon. It is the treatment of the canon as a working set rather than a sacred list: a revisable structure of shared reference whose contents and proportions remain subject to declared aims, criticism, and periodic review. This position does not dissolve standards. It requires standards to become explicit. Once that happens, disagreements about repertory become more serious and less rhetorical. One can then ask whether a curriculum truly needs the repertoire it protects, whether a season design genuinely balances memory with discovery, and whether a canon functions as an opening into musical history or as a closure against it.

6. The Rational Kernel of Conservatism: Defenses and Limits

Critique of musical conservatism is necessary, but it is weakened when it ignores the best arguments on the other side. Not all defenses of continuity are

fallacious. At least four lines of reasoning give conservative musical practices a prima facie rational standing under specific conditions.

The first is epistemic conservatism. In epistemology, the conservative idea is that existing beliefs or practices may enjoy default rational status unless defeated by strong counterevidence, partly because constant revision is costly and because inherited structures often encode prior learning (Christensen, 1994). Translated into musical pedagogy, this suggests that a conservatory need not abandon a lineage-based technical method merely because alternatives are imaginable. If the existing method produces reliable results, burden of proof matters. Radical curricular innovation can impose costs on students, teachers, and institutions; it can also destroy comparability across levels of training. As McAllister (2021) argues, however, conservatism becomes dogmatic when it ceases to be responsive to defeaters. The default status of an inherited practice is not indefinite entitlement. It remains rational only while counterevidence, exclusionary effects, and superior alternatives are seriously assessable.

The second defense is prudential rather than strictly epistemic. Thinkers skeptical of rationalist redesign, from Burke to Oakeshott and Hayek, argued in different ways that inherited institutions often embody practical intelligence that centralized or abstract reason fails to anticipate (Burke, 1982; Hayek, 1988; Oakeshott, 1991). Applied to music, the point is not that tradition is sacred but that complex practices cannot always be rebuilt at will without collateral loss. An ensemble culture, a pedagogical sequence, or an apprenticeship model may include supports that become visible only once they are removed. This argument has force, especially where tacit coordination matters. Yet it is not a veto against change. Its rational conclusion is gradualism, experimental reform, and humility about redesign—not unconditional deference to inherited authority.

The third defense concerns the social function of shared reference. A canon can provide common material through which teachers, performers, critics, and audiences communicate. Without some shared repertorial coordinates, musical discourse fragments and pedagogical continuity weakens. Goehr's (1992) historical work helps explain why institutions depend on such reference points, while Shils (1981) reminds us that traditions often organize belonging as much as knowledge. Shared memory is not trivial. Musical communities need repertories that can be cited, contested, and reinterpreted across time. But again, the coordination argument establishes at most that some selective core is functionally useful. It does not prove that a particular inherited distribution deserves indefinite centrality, nor that other works should remain peripheral.

The fourth defense is perhaps the most important: tradition is not identical with the status quo. This distinction is often ignored in polemical debates. The status quo refers to a current configuration of power, prestige, and resource allocation. Tradition refers to patterns of transmission across time. The two may overlap, but they are not the same. A tradition can contain internal criticism, self-revision, and disputes over standards. Shils (1981) saw traditions as dynamic rather than merely inert; Popper (1963) argued that tradition plays a rational role only when it remains open to criticism; MacIntyre (1988) emphasized that traditions of inquiry often develop through conflicts internal to them rather than through external replacement. In music, this means that defending tradition does not require defending every existing institutional arrangement. One may preserve a repertoire while changing access routes, performance practice, teaching authority, or evaluative criteria.

These defenses indicate that there is a rational kernel within conservatism, but only under stringent conditions. First, the practice must be defeasible: institutions must be able to say what kinds of evidence, argument, or social cost would count against the inherited arrangement. Second, criteria of value must be articulated rather than smuggled in under the language of excellence. Third, continuity must be distinguished from monopolization. A core repertoire may be justified, but monopoly over attention, funding, and prestige is a further claim requiring separate defense. Fourth, protective continuity must not be confused with immunity from accountability. A tradition that cannot state its ends, answer criticism, or revise its procedures has ceased to be rationally conservative and has become merely self-protective.

There is also a symmetrical danger on the other side. Some forms of anti-conservative rhetoric reproduce their own hidden conservatism. The constant demand for novelty can stabilize market rhythms, shorten memory, and reward only those innovations that fit existing circuits of visibility. Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) critique of cultural standardization remains suggestive here, as does Williams's (1977) reminder that institutions can selectively absorb the new without altering their deeper structures. In other words, the language of disruption can become a routine. This is why the relevant opposition is not old versus new. It is justified continuity versus unjustified continuity, and thoughtful change versus empty change.

7. Institutional Conservatism in Conservatories, Orchestras, and Festivals

The general framework becomes more concrete when applied to musical institutions. Conservatories, orchestras, festivals, archives, and publishing

networks do not merely transmit music; they organize the conditions under which music becomes legible, valuable, and professionally consequential. In Bourdieu's sense, they participate in the struggle over legitimate classification (Bourdieu, 1993). What counts as serious music, what counts as training, what counts as a canonical work, and what counts as an appropriate listener are all partly institutional effects.

Conservatories offer the clearest case. They are structurally predisposed toward continuity because their task is not only to produce expression but to reproduce competences. Scales, études, harmonic models, counterpoint exercises, standard repertoire, and juried progression systems create comparability across cohorts. Teacher lineages help stabilize expectations, and common curricular sequences allow institutions to evaluate achievement with some consistency. In that sense, conservatory conservatism is not mysterious. It is often instrumentally rational relative to the goal of producing technically reliable performers within limited time. A violin department cannot teach every style equally, and a piano curriculum built around standard repertory can efficiently cultivate reading, touch, historical familiarity, and audition readiness.

The difficulty begins when these instrumentally rational procedures are silently converted into claims about the whole of musicianship. A curriculum organized around the needs of orchestral or recital culture may then present itself as a universal account of musical excellence. Improvisation, composition, community practice, vernacular traditions, and technologically mediated musicianship can appear secondary not because they are judged and rejected through explicit criteria, but because the inherited curriculum naturalizes one path as the path. This is precisely where value rationality becomes decisive. If the institution's actual goal is elite orchestral reproduction, its means may be coherent. If its stated goal is broad musical education, creative pluralism, or social access, then the same means may be normatively misaligned. Criticism is strongest when it targets this misalignment rather than continuity as such.

Orchestras face a related but distinct set of pressures. Rehearsal time is expensive, audiences are uncertain, donors often prefer familiarity, and administrative cultures tend toward predictability. Programming a season around a stable canonical core is therefore highly intelligible as an instrumentally rational strategy. Familiar works reduce marketing risk, lower interpretive uncertainty, and allow institutions to signal seriousness through recognized names. Yet the fact that such programming is intelligible does not make it sufficient. If an orchestra claims a civic, educational, or publicly funded mission, exclusive dependence on canonical "hits" becomes harder to justify. The issue is not that Beethoven or Tchaikovsky should disappear. It is that

the institution must state why repeated concentration on a narrow band of repertoire best serves its mission, and what mechanisms it has created to ensure that preservation does not become monopoly.

Some organizations respond through balancing strategies: pairing canonical works with commissions, embedding contextual programming, building multi-season commitments to neglected composers, or connecting core repertoire to wider historical narratives. These strategies illustrate the first quadrant of the matrix discussed earlier. They preserve shared reference while opening institutional space for revision and expansion. Other organizations make the language of innovation central to their branding yet invest little in rehearsal, interpretation, or long-term audience development for unfamiliar work. They occupy the third quadrant: good ends, weak means. Still others optimize almost entirely for ticket predictability and donor reassurance. Such orchestras may be operationally competent but normatively thin if they never clarify why financial caution should dominate every cultural objective.

Festivals complicate matters further because they often derive legitimacy from curation itself. A festival can be conservative by repeating a fixed prestige canon, but it can also be conservative while appearing innovative. Contemporary music festivals, for example, sometimes recycle the same narrow set of legitimating names, aesthetic codes, and institutional gatekeepers, thereby stabilizing an avant-garde orthodoxy. The lesson is straightforward: conservatism is not a style label. It is a governance pattern. Any institution becomes conservative in the analytically relevant sense when it converts a historically contingent selection into a self-protecting norm without adequate public reasons.

Archives and publishing infrastructures show another dimension of the problem. Works that are edited, digitized, recorded, and distributed become teachable and performable; works that remain inaccessible remain conceptually peripheral no matter how often institutions declare openness. Thus, institutional conservatism operates not only at the level of taste but at the level of infrastructure. What exists for performers and students is partly what institutions have made available. A chapter or season devoted to neglected repertory cannot succeed if parts, editions, metadata, and performance materials remain difficult to obtain. In such cases, calls for diversification fail not only because of ideology but because means have not been built. Again, the framework matters: one must ask whether the problem lies in goals, implementation, or both.

The most productive criticism of institutions therefore does not demand permanent novelty. It demands declared ends, visible criteria, and reviewable

procedures. A conservatory should be able to say what kind of musician it aims to form and why that aim deserves allegiance. An orchestra should be able to explain how its programming structure relates to memory, discovery, public mission, and financial survival. A festival should specify whether it seeks prestige confirmation, aesthetic experimentation, public pedagogy, or scene-building. Without such articulation, appeals to tradition or innovation remain slogans. With it, conservative practices can be defended, criticized, or redesigned in more exact terms.

8. Invisible Conservatism on Platforms: Streaming, Recommendation, and Playlist Governance

If conservatism in institutions is often explicit, conservatism on digital platforms is frequently opaque. Streaming services and social media interfaces present themselves as engines of discovery, personalization, and frictionless abundance. The user is told that everything is available and that recommendation systems are there to help navigate excess. Yet the relevant question is not whether platforms sort music. They must. The question is according to what objectives they sort it, what biases those objectives generate, and how those biases structure the listener's horizon.

Research on streaming repeatedly shows that recommendation environments are shaped by commercial imperatives such as retention, engagement, and reduced churn, alongside editorial curation and infrastructural design (Morris & Powers, 2015; Eriksson et al., 2019; Prey, 2020). This does not mean that platforms consciously defend tradition in any ideological sense. Their conservatism is often an emergent effect of optimization. When systems reward prior popularity, low-friction familiarity, skip resistance, or playlist compatibility, already visible tracks and artists can receive disproportionate reinforcement. Òscar Celma (2010) described this dynamic through the contrast between the promise of the "long tail" and the practical tendency toward "long fail": digital abundance does not automatically yield diverse discovery. What is technically available may remain culturally invisible.

This helps explain the notion of invisible conservatism. No curator needs to say "we privilege the familiar." No institution needs to defend a canon. The system can still reproduce conservative outcomes by amplifying previous success, narrowing recommendation neighborhoods, and translating listener history into probabilistic sameness. From the user's perspective, the process feels personalized rather than conservative. The recommendation appears to emerge from the listener's own preferences, even when those preferences

are being recursively stabilized by the platform's design. What looks like individualized exploration can therefore become a loop of managed familiarity.

The effects on musical culture are significant. First, popularity bias privileges actors who already possess advantages in visibility, marketing resources, catalog depth, and playlist placement. Second, niche, experimental, local, or minoritized repertoires may remain difficult to encounter unless users already know to seek them out. Third, the playlist form can subtly alter listening itself. As Prey (2020) notes, curatorial power is not limited to selecting tracks; it shapes the temporal and affective organization of listening. When music is encountered primarily through mood-based, activity-based, or low-attention playlists, the conditions for engaging larger forms, historically situated repertoires, or difficult works may narrow. In this sense, platform conservatism does not simply preserve old content. It can also preserve narrow modes of attention.

The black-box character of recommendation systems intensifies the problem. Eriksson et al. (2019) emphasize how difficult it is for users to know how streaming platforms organize visibility. The Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation literature review similarly notes the relevance of popularity bias, representational bias, and the lack of clear public evaluative metrics for music recommendation systems (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023). This opacity matters normatively because it blocks contestation. In a concert institution, one can at least identify the program, the artistic director, or the mission statement. On a platform, the logic of selection is distributed across code, editorial practice, business priorities, and interface design. Responsibility becomes harder to locate precisely where cultural steering becomes more pervasive.

None of this implies that algorithmic curation is inherently irrational. Relative to commercial goals, such systems may be highly instrumentally rational. If the end is to keep users listening, reduce abandonment, and channel attention into monetizable streams, recommendation engines can be extremely effective. The criticism arises when platforms, regulators, or publics imply broader ends—cultural diversity, fair visibility, listener education, horizon expansion—while maintaining systems optimized almost exclusively for retention. Under those conditions, the means may be strong while the value rationality of the goal remains weak. The platform succeeds technically by criteria too narrow for the social role it implicitly claims.

A more balanced assessment also requires noting that digital systems could, in principle, be designed otherwise. Recommendation systems can be tuned toward exploration, calibrated diversity, local discovery, or the strategic insertion of low-visibility works. The claim that platforms produce conservative outcomes is therefore conditional and falsifiable, not metaphysical.

It would be weakened by robust evidence that recommendation architectures reliably broaden listening over time, reduce visibility concentration, and do so through transparent, stable commitments rather than occasional promotional campaigns. Popper's (1963) insistence on defeasibility is useful here. The problem is not that platforms sort; it is that their sorting often escapes clear public standards.

There is a historical irony in this. Digital music culture is commonly narrated as the end of gatekeeping, yet it often replaces visible gatekeepers with distributed and less accountable ones. The older concert canon and the newer recommendation loop differ technologically, but they may converge functionally when both channel attention toward a limited set of already validated objects. Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) critique of standardization remains resonant, not because streaming simply repeats mid-century mass culture, but because the tension between formal abundance and effective repetition persists. The novelty of the interface should not obscure the conservatism of the outcome.

9. Critical Continuity: Toward a Normative Model

The preceding analysis suggests that debates about musical conservatism should avoid two symmetrical errors. The first is to treat tradition as intrinsically irrational and rupture as inherently emancipatory. The second is to treat tradition as intrinsically legitimate and therefore exempt from scrutiny. Both positions obscure the difference between the rationality of means and the rationality of ends. What is needed instead is a normative model that preserves the cognitive and social goods of continuity without allowing inherited arrangements to hide from criticism. I call this model critical continuity.

Critical continuity is not a compromise born of indecision. It is a demanding institutional stance. Its first requirement is explicitness about ends. Institutions and platforms should state what goods they are trying to secure: technical discipline, shared memory, public access, artistic risk, local cultural preservation, fair visibility, or some combination of these. Without explicit ends, continuity becomes a reflex and innovation becomes a slogan. The second requirement is the separation of preservation from monopoly. A core repertoire may be justified; monopoly over resources, prestige, or attention is a further claim that must be argued independently. The third requirement is revisability. Traditions remain rational only when they can name the circumstances under which they would alter their criteria, curriculum, programming, or recommendation logic.

A practical way to formulate critical continuity is through diagnostic questions, condensed in Table 2. What good is being protected by this continuity? Who benefits from the current arrangement, and who remains systematically unseen? What criteria govern selection? Are those criteria publicly available and periodically reviewed? What evidence would count as a defeater for the inherited arrangement? What infrastructures—commissions, editions, teacher training, metadata, rehearsal time, discovery tools—exist to make declared values actionable? These questions do not force an institution toward permanent expansion or indiscriminate pluralism. They force it to become answerable.

For musical institutions, critical continuity implies several concrete commitments. Conservatories should distinguish clearly between training for specific professional pathways and claims about the whole of musicianship. If a curriculum is heavily centered on a canon because it prepares students for orchestral auditions, that is a limited and intelligible rationale. It should not be presented as a neutral statement of universal musical value. Orchestras should treat the canon as a working set of public memory rather than as an immutable list. This means establishing multi-season strategies for new work and neglected repertories, revising explanatory materials, and designing audiences rather than merely measuring them. Festivals should disclose their curatorial aims and avoid mistaking brand coherence for cultural necessity.

For platforms, critical continuity requires recognizing recommendation systems as sites of cultural governance. If a service claims to support discovery, diversity, or artist development, these aims must be translated into measurable design priorities rather than appended to retention logic as public relations language. Diversity metrics, visibility audits, and exploration incentives would not abolish commercial goals, but they could make explicit the trade-offs that are currently hidden in opaque optimization. Hesmondhalgh et al. (2023) are particularly useful here because they show that the ethical question is not merely whether algorithms recommend effectively, but what kind of musical culture their criteria help produce.

Critical continuity also matters for traditions outside dominant institutions. When continuity protects vulnerable musical practices, the model does not demand reckless openness in the name of liberal abstraction. Protective boundaries can be justified when they sustain a threatened language, ritual form, or communal memory. But the same standard still applies: the aim should be stated, the authority structure should be discussable, and internal critique should not be dismissed as betrayal. A tradition becomes strongest

when it can explain why it persists and how it will respond to pressure, rather than treating every question as an external attack.

The deeper philosophical point is that continuity deserves neither automatic suspicion nor automatic reverence. Burkean prudence, Oakeshottian skepticism toward over-rationalized redesign, Hayekian sensitivity to dispersed knowledge, MacIntyrean attention to tradition-constituted reasoning, Popperian criticism, and Habermasian public justification can all be brought into productive tension here (Burke, 1982; Habermas, 1984; Hayek, 1945, 1988; MacIntyre, 1988; Oakeshott, 1991; Popper, 1963). Critical continuity is the name for holding those insights together. It rejects the fantasy that musical life can be rebuilt from zero, but it equally rejects the fantasy that inherited forms speak for themselves.

A rational musical culture, on this view, is not one that abolishes standards, memory, or lineage. It is one that knows what these things are for, what they cost, and how they can be revised without dissolving the goods they carry. The point is not to replace conservatism with permanent volatility. It is to transform unexamined conservatism into accountable continuity.

Table 2. Diagnostic questions for evaluating continuity in musical institutions and platforms.

Dimension	Guiding question	Signs of rational continuity	Warning signs
Goal	What good is being protected or advanced?	Explicit pedagogical, cultural, civic, or artistic rationale.	Appeal to precedent, prestige, or familiarity alone.
Selection	How are works, styles, or artists chosen?	Published and reviewable criteria tied to mission.	Opaque reputation loops or informal gatekeeping.
Revision	What would count as a defeater?	Regular review, critique procedures, and willingness to recalibrate.	Immunity from criticism and indefinite self-confirmation.
Infrastructure	Are the declared aims materially supported?	Resources for commissions, editions, teacher training, metadata, rehearsal time, or discovery tools.	Symbolic commitments without institutional follow-through.

Note. The table is not a scoring instrument; it is a compact checklist for testing whether continuity is justified, operationalized, and open to criticism.

10. Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the label conservative becomes analytically useful only when musical practices are evaluated on two distinct planes. Instrumental rationality in action concerns whether an institution, pedagogy, program, or platform effectively realizes its stated end. Value rationality of the goal concerns whether that end itself can be defended by explicit normative reasons. Once these planes are separated, debates about conservatism become less rhetorical and more exact. One can distinguish strategically competent but normatively weak forms of continuity from defensible but poorly implemented attempts at preservation or reform.

The argument also showed why tradition cannot be reduced either to irrational inertia or to unquestionable authority. Traditions may transmit tacit knowledge, coordinate shared memory, and protect vulnerable musical worlds. They may also naturalize exclusion, monopolize prestige, and confuse historical success with present entitlement. The same is true of canons. They can function as useful structures of reference while remaining selective and revisable. Their existence does not excuse institutions from stating the standards by which they select, exclude, and prioritize.

Applying the framework to institutions and platforms clarified two forms of conservatism. In conservatories, orchestras, and festivals, conservatism often appears as explicit continuity justified by pedagogy, solvency, prestige, or mission. In streaming environments, conservatism is more often invisible: a product of popularity bias, playlist governance, and optimization criteria that quietly favor familiarity. In both cases, the decisive issue is not whether continuity exists, but whether the ends being served are publicly defensible and whether the means align with those ends.

The constructive proposal of critical continuity follows from this diagnosis. Continuity in music should be treated neither as a self-justifying inheritance nor as a residue to be overcome by default. It should be defended, where it is defensible, as a revisable practice with articulated aims, explicit criteria, and identifiable defeaters. Conversely, where continuity protects hierarchy without argument, narrows musical possibility without necessity, or conceals its own standards, it should be criticized without hesitation. Reason in music does not require choosing between tradition and change. It requires learning to ask better questions of both.

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