Three Essays in the Economics of Music: Reputation and Success of Musicians

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The music industry is a market of superstars, that is a market where a relatively small number of people earn enormous amounts of money and dominate the activity in which they engage (Rosen, 1981). Theories on the superstar phenomenon suggest that luck (Adler, 1985) or talent (Rosen, 1981) are the driving forces behind success. Thus, the “superstars models” left performers with no “active” role: successful artists are either endowed with an innate talent far above the average or are extremely lucky. However, all musicians (talented or not; lucky or not) take continuously decisions that affect their career. Chapter 1 and 2 of this dissertation analyze in details some of these decisions and their influence on success.

Chapter 1, Rock Bands: Matching, Recording & Work Organization, investigates the impact of partnerships, matching, and work organization on the success of rock musicians using a unique database of 1,494 albums released between 1970 and 2004. We show that rock bands differ in their work organization because the agreements between the members of band are different. These agreements can be seen as implicit contracts. Drawing on this observation, we develop a model where agents (musicians) with different levels of creativity match (to form a band) and produce a joint output (a song). We show that the way agents match (positively or negatively) is correlated with success and depends on the (in)completeness of contracts. The theoretical results are supported by the data.

Chapter 2, Musical Characteristics and Success in Commercial Music, analyzes the relationship between musical characteristics, that can objectively be measured, and different types of success (commercial success, critical success, and success assessed by music lovers). We show that the strength and the direction (positive or negative) of the relationship between success and musical characteristics vary with the measure of success.

The third chapter goes in a slightly different direction than the two others as it deals with long term reputation of composers rather than commercial success of pop-rock musicians. Chapter 3, The Formation of the Canons of the Baroque Music, analyzes the reputation of baroque composers over time. The dataset makes it possible to describe the evolution of composers’ reputation and of the baroque canon. The entries in seven important musical dictionaries written between 1790 and 2000 are used to measure reputations. We provide evidence that a consensus exists between musicologists, who often rely on their predecessors’ work.

References: