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Sample libraries and their impact on the music industry

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to determine the role of sample libraries in the transformation of music production processes in the context of the digitalization of the contemporary music industry. The paper examines the evolution of sampling technologies from early hardware and digital solutions to software tools and cloud-based subscription platforms that provide access to extensive royalty-free sound content. The analytical framework includes a comparative examination of technological development stages, case analysis of leading platforms and libraries, as well as a review of legal precedents and licensing models regulating the use of samples.

It is demonstrated that the widespread availability of high-quality sample libraries reduces technical and financial barriers to entry into the music industry, alters the professional role of the producer, and contributes to the transition to a production model in which a single specialist can simultaneously perform the functions of composer, arranger, and sound engineer. It is established that sample libraries expand the genre spectrum of contemporary music by accelerating stylistic hybridization and the emergence of new subgenres, while also serving as an infrastructure for the formation of sound trends.

Issues of copyright and licensing are analyzed separately, showing that the proliferation of royalty-free libraries reduces the risks associated with unauthorized sampling but introduces new conflicts related to the mass use of identical sound elements. The article concludes that sample libraries form an independent market segment and promote the development of “sound-as-a-service” business models, reinforcing the platformization of music production. The integration of sample libraries with generative artificial intelligence technologies is identified as a перспективный direction, while preserving the decisive role of human creative choice.

Keywords: sample libraries, music production, digitalization, royalty-free, sampling, genre hybridization, licensing, platformization, subscription models, generative artificial intelligence.

Annotatsiya

Maqolaning maqsadi — sempl kutubxonalarining raqamlashtirish sharoitida musiqiy ishlab chiqarish jarayonlari transformatsiyasidagi rolini aniqlashdan iborat. Ishda semplash texnologiyalarining dastlabki apparat va raqamli yechimlardan boshlab, dasturiy vositalar hamda keng ko‘lamli royalty-free tovush kontentiga kirishni ta’minlovchi bulutli obuna platformalarigacha bo‘lgan evolyutsiyasi ko‘rib chiqiladi. Tahliliy asos sifatida texnologik rivojlanish bosqichlarini qiyosiy o‘rganish, yetakchi platforma va kutubxonalar faoliyatini tahlil qilish, shuningdek sempllardan foydalanishni tartibga soluvchi huquqiy pretsedentlar va litsenziyalash modellari sharhi qo‘llanilgan.

Yuqori sifatli sempl kutubxonalarining keng ommaga taqdim etilishi musiqiy industriyaga kirishdagi texnik va moliyaviy to‘siqlarni kamaytirishi, produserning kasbiy rolini o‘zgartirishi hamda bir mutaxassisning kompozitor, aranjirovkachi va ovoz rejissyori funksiyalarini birlashtira oladigan ishlab chiqarish modeliga o‘tishni ta’minlashi ko‘rsatib berilgan. Aniqlanishicha, sempl kutubxonalari zamonaviy musiqaning janr doirasini kengaytirib, stilistik gibridizatsiya va yangi kichik janrlarning paydo bo‘lish jarayonlarini jadallashtiradi, shuningdek yangi tovush trendlarini shakllantiruvchi infratuzilma sifatida namoyon bo‘ladi.

Mualliflik huquqi va litsenziyalash masalalari alohida tahlil qilinib, royalty-free kutubxonalarining tarqalishi noqonuniy semplash xavfini kamaytirishi, biroq bir xil tovush elementlarining ommaviy qo‘llanilishi bilan bog‘liq yangi nizoli holatlarni yuzaga keltirishi qayd etilgan. Xulosa sifatida sempl kutubxonalari bozorning mustaqil segmentini shakllantirishi hamda “tovush xizmat sifatida” modeliga asoslangan yangi biznes yondashuvlarini rivojlantirishi, musiqiy ishlab chiqarishning platformalashuvini kuchaytirishi ta’kidlanadi. Kelgusida sempl kutubxonalarini generativ sun’iy intellekt texnologiyalari bilan integratsiyalash istiqbollari, inson ijodiy tanlovining yetakchi rolini saqlagan holda, muhim yo‘nalish sifatida belgilangan.

Kalit so‘zlar: sempl kutubxonalari, musiqiy ishlab chiqarish, raqamlashtirish, royalty-free, semplash, janr gibridizatsiyasi, litsenziyalash, platformalashuv, obuna modellari, generativ sun’iy intellekt.

Аннотация

Цель статьи — определить роль библиотек сэмплов в трансформации музыкального производства в условиях цифровизации музыкальной индустрии. Рассматривается эволюция сэмплирования от ранних аппаратных и цифровых технологий к программным инструментам и облачным подписочным платформам, обеспечивающим доступ к масштабным массивам royalty-free звукового контента. В качестве аналитической основы

используются сравнительное рассмотрение этапов технологического развития, анализ кейсов крупнейших платформ и библиотек, а также обзор правовых прецедентов и лицензионных моделей, регулирующих использование сэмплов.

Показано, что доступность высококачественных библиотек снижает технические и финансовые барьеры входа, изменяет профессиональную роль продюсера и способствует переходу к модели, в которой один специалист способен совмещать функции композитора, аранжировщика и звукорежиссёра. Установлено, что библиотеки сэмплов расширяют жанровый спектр современной музыки, ускоряя процессы гибридизации и появление новых поджанров, а также выступают инфраструктурой формирования звуковых трендов.

Отдельно анализируются вопросы авторского права и лицензирования: показано, что распространение royalty-free библиотек снижает риски нелицензированного сэмплинга, но создаёт новые конфликты, связанные с массовым использованием идентичных элементов.

Сделан вывод о том, что библиотеки сэмплов формируют самостоятельный сегмент рынка и развивают бизнес-модели «звук как услуга», усиливая платформизацию музыкального производства. Перспективным направлением обозначена интеграция библиотек сэмплов с генеративными ИИ-технологиями при сохранении определяющей роли творческого выбора человека.

Ключевые слова: библиотеки сэмплов, музыкальное производство, цифровизация, royalty-free, сэмплирование, жанровая гибридизация, лицензирование, платформизация, подписочные модели, генеративный ИИ.

Historically, sampling evolved from tape editing techniques and early devices such as the Mellotron to digital samplers and software-based samplers of the late 20th century [1]. The emergence of accessible digital audio workstations (DAWs) and software samplers (Kontakt, EXS24, etc.) made it possible to transfer vast sample libraries onto a standard personal computer.

The contemporary stage is characterized by cloud-based libraries, where producers gain access to millions of sounds via subscription. For example, the Splice platform recorded nearly 350 million sample downloads across all genres in 2024

[2][3]. Its library contains millions of royalty-free sounds that can be directly integrated into projects.

The ComposerCloud+ service by EastWest provides subscription-based access to more than 40–42 thousand virtual instruments, with a total "showcase" value exceeding 12,000 USD [9]. This means that a single composer has access to a full range of orchestral, ethnic, electronic, and other sounds that were previously available only to large studios.

The availability of high-quality samples allows a single individual to act simultaneously as composer, arranger, and sound engineer. Instead of costly recording sessions with live musicians, a producer can assemble a convincing orchestral, electronic, or hybrid arrangement using ready-made libraries.

A study on the Splice platform notes that it serves more than 4 million users, ranging from beginner "bedroom producers" to established hip-hop producers, thereby centralizing access to royalty-free samples and production tools [4]. Thus, sample libraries function as a "virtual studio," enabling work with large-scale sound materials in a home environment.

Sampling initially emerged as a tool of genre synthesis. In hip-hop of the 1970s–1980s, producers combined fragments of funk, soul, disco, and jazz, creating a fundamentally new style [1]. Modern sample libraries extend this principle: with a single click, one can incorporate African percussion, Asian melodic instruments, vintage vinyl loops, or contemporary EDM sound design into a track.

Platforms such as Splice document the growth of hybrid genres. According to Splice data and MIDiA analytics, in 2024 the fastest-growing genre on the platform was pluggnb — a hybrid of trap and 1990s R&B [2]. This trend is directly linked to the free combination of sounds from different eras and styles available in libraries.

MIDiA analysts and Splice partners indicate that demand for samples effectively predicts musical trends: the sounds widely used by producers today shape the sound of future hits and the emergence of new subgenres [2][3]. From this

perspective, sample libraries can be seen as “genre incubators,” where new stylistic combinations are tested by thousands of independent musicians before being adopted by mainstream labels.

Sample libraries have significantly reduced financial and technical barriers. Instead of an expensive studio, hardware synthesizers, and instrument collections, a laptop, a basic DAW, and a subscription are sufficient. Many resources also offer free sample packs, providing beginners with access to high-quality drums, basslines, synths, and vocal phrases.

Research on the platformization of hip-hop production shows that Splice, as a major marketplace for royalty-free samples, “opens up the production process” to a vast audience—from novices to top-tier producers [4]. Consequently, sample libraries function as both educational and creative resources: by analyzing ready-made loops and packs, beginner producers quickly master modern techniques of sound design and arrangement.

Due to the accessibility of sample libraries, the number of independent artists and producers has increased dramatically. A home producer can create a professionally sounding track, release it on streaming platforms, and monetize it without label involvement. In this sense, sample libraries are a key driver of the “democratization” of the industry—entry barriers are no longer limited to those with access to studios and large budgets.

Before the emergence of mass royalty-free sample libraries, sampling was often carried out without formal permission, leading to high-profile legal cases. A classic example is *Grand Upright Music Ltd. v. Warner Bros. Records Inc.* (1991), in which rapper Biz Markie used a fragment of Gilbert O’Sullivan’s “Alone Again (Naturally)” without a license. The court ruled this as copyright infringement and effectively established the practice of mandatory sample clearance [6]. This decision significantly tightened conditions for artists, particularly in hip-hop.

In Europe, the case of *Pelham v. Kraftwerk* ("Metall auf Metall") was widely debated. The ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) emphasized that even a very short and recognizable sample may infringe the exclusive rights of the phonogram producer; however, the use of a sample in an unrecognizable, modified form does not constitute infringement [7]. These precedents established strict legal boundaries for sampling existing recordings.

In this context, the industry's response was the creation of sample libraries with pre-cleared rights. Platforms such as Splice explicitly state that all their samples are fully royalty-free: users receive a non-exclusive license to use sounds in both commercial and non-commercial projects [5]. The license is typically perpetual and non-exclusive, meaning the same sample can be legally used by multiple artists.

The Splice FAQ clarifies that while the author of a new work owns the rights to the composition, they do not obtain exclusive rights to the samples themselves—this resolves the issue of permitted mass usage but reduces uniqueness at the level of source sound [5].

Even with formal licensing compliance, conflicts may arise. A well-known example is Justin Bieber's track "Running Over" (2020) and Asher Monroe's "Synergy" (2019). Both artists used the same melodic loop created by producer Laxcity and released on Splice as a royalty-free sample [8]. After Bieber's album release, Monroe accused him of plagiarism, but it became clear that both tracks legally relied on the same publicly available sample.

This case demonstrates that the widespread availability of samples leads to songs with identical elements. Legally permissible, such situations nonetheless raise questions about originality and the recognizability of an author's style.

The growth of sample libraries has created a new sector within the music business. In 2021, Splice raised $55 million in a Series D funding round, after which its valuation approached $500 million [3]. Industry sources report that the platform

generates over $100 million in annual revenue and has approximately 600,000 paying subscribers [10].

Academic studies characterize Splice as a major online marketplace for royalty-free samples that “platformizes” hip-hop production and increasingly influences musical processes [4]. This indicates that music production is becoming dependent not only on labels and studios but also on digital platforms that control access to sound materials.

Sample libraries активно employ subscription-based models. Splice Sounds offers monthly credits for downloading individual samples, while EastWest ComposerCloud+ and Output Arcade provide access to entire catalogs in an “all-inclusive” format [9]. This transforms sound into a service: instead of purchasing expensive libraries outright, composers subscribe and gain access to continuously updated collections.

This model is particularly attractive for students, independent musicians, and composers for film and games: instead of significant capital investment in multiple libraries, they pay a relatively small monthly fee for access to a full arsenal of sounds.

In addition to platforms, sample creators also generate income. A distinct layer of producers and sound designers has emerged, whose primary activity is the production of commercial sample packs. Reports and FAQs indicate that the market for sample packs and subscription platforms is growing, while companies introduce additional mechanisms—such as certified licenses for downloaded samples—that help users protect themselves from incorrect copyright claims on platforms like YouTube [5].

Market consolidation is also taking place. In 2025, Splice announced the acquisition of the British company Spitfire Audio, known for its premium orchestral libraries, for approximately $50 million [10]. This deal strengthens Splice’s position as an ecosystem combining mass-market samples with high-end virtual instruments.

Among the key players in the contemporary discourse on sample libraries are:

1. Splice — the largest online library of royalty-free samples and a plugin marketplace, valued at around $500 million, with hundreds of millions of annual downloads and over 4 million users [2–5][10][11].
2. EastWest (ComposerCloud+) — one of the oldest developers of libraries, specializing in orchestral, choral, and ethnic instruments;
3. Spitfire Audio — a British developer of high-end orchestral libraries (BBC Symphony, Hans Zimmer Drums, etc.);
4. Native Instruments — developer of Kontakt and Komplete, widely used in film scoring and music production;
5. Output (Arcade) — a platform combining sample libraries with interactive synthesis tools.

Sample libraries have radically transformed the music industry. Production has become faster and more accessible, while the genre landscape has become increasingly hybrid. Millions of independent artists now have access to tools that previously required substantial budgets. Legal and economic systems have adapted through royalty-free libraries, subscription services, and new business models, although new types of conflicts have also emerged.

In the future, further integration of sample libraries with generative AI can be expected. Intelligent systems will not only search for sounds but also synthesize new ones based on vast archives of existing samples. However, as both market practice and artistic experience demonstrate, the decisive factor remains human creative choice: libraries are merely tools, while it is the composer and producer who transform them into music.

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