

Sustaining Creative Work:

*Satisfaction of Classical Music
Composers with Institutional
Support in Slovakia*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Slovak composers' perceptions of institutional support, specifically examining grants and subsidies, and how these mechanisms influence creative autonomy. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power and Sapiro's cultural mediation, the study analyses key indicators of satisfaction, identifies systemic obstacles, and discusses the bureaucratic dimensions of grant systems. Based on original quantitative study involving thirty-three respondents and twenty-nine structured questions, the study analyses key indicators of satisfaction, identifies systemic obstacles, and discusses the symbolic and bureaucratic dimensions of grant systems. The findings reveal a striking discrepancy: While composers report relatively high success rates in obtaining grants, their overall satisfaction remains moderate, hindered in particular by administrative burdens. The article interprets these results using the concepts of institutional autonomy, symbolic power (Bourdieu), and cultural mediation (Sapiro).

Key words: contemporary classical music, cultural policy, arts culture grants, institutional support, sustainability of creative work

INTRODUCTION

The article contributes to the 2025 issue of *Musicology Today*, themed 'Music, Nature, and Sound: Musical Ecology', by offering a perspective on cultural and institutional sustainability. While it does not engage with acoustic ecology or sonic environments directly, it addresses a parallel and equally vital question: under what institutional conditions can contemporary music survive and evolve in a sustainable manner? Institutional support is not only a matter of funding but also of enabling the long-term viability of creative ecosystems – particularly in smaller countries where market structures are insufficient to sustain non-commercial art forms.

In Slovakia, as in many other small European countries, the survival and development of contemporary classical music heavily depends on institutional support. Unlike in larger markets, where private patronage, commercial production, or recording industries may create more diverse income streams, Slovak composers rely predominantly on public funding – especially through state grants – to continue their creative work. These systems of support are often mediated by formal cultural policies, public institutions, and peer-reviewed mechanisms designed to distribute resources based on artistic merit.

In such an environment, public grant institutions play a crucial role not only in providing financial means but also in symbolically legitimising artistic activity. They act

as mediators of aesthetic value and gatekeepers of public recognition, often determining which projects receive visibility and which creators can continue producing works. As such, grant systems are far more than financial instruments; they shape the very architecture of the artistic field. In smaller countries, such as Slovakia, this role can become crucial to the very survival of artistic practice.

Based on an original empirical study, this article examines how Slovak composers perceive this institutional support system, how they assess the structure, accessibility, and legitimacy of grant mechanisms. What aspects of the current system generate satisfaction or frustration? And what do these evaluations reveal about broader struggles for artistic autonomy and recognition in contemporary music? This article addresses these questions using both quantitative data and sociological analysis, with a theoretical foundation grounded in Bourdieu's field theory and Sapiro's institutional critique.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of artistic autonomy, particularly in relation to institutional control, is central to understanding composers' experiences with grant systems in Slovakia. This theoretical lens helps explore how composers balance creative independence with the need for institutional support. Rather than being a fixed or abstract ideal, autonomy is shaped by institutional conditions, symbolic hierarchies, and the strategic positions of agents within a field. This study draws on multiple theoretical concepts to interpret composers' experience within the Slovak grant system.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field¹ emphasises that artists operate within structured spaces of competition, where symbolic capital (e.g. prestige, recognition) is as crucial as economic one. The field of cultural production is characterised by a constant struggle over legitimacy – who is entitled to define what 'art' is, and under what conditions support should be allocated. Within this logic, institutional grants are not neutral; they help shape the field's internal hierarchy by validating certain genres, aesthetics, or biographies over others.

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993).

Gisèle Sapiro² extends Bourdieu's thinking by focusing on the negotiation of autonomy within institutional settings. She stresses that the ideal of disinterested creation (i.e. the notion that artistic creation should be driven solely by intrinsic motivation, without regard for external rewards such as financial compensation, public recognition, or institutional validation) often conceals the underlying dependence on both symbolic recognition and material support. As Bourdieu's field theory suggests, artists must engage with institutional mechanisms to gain legitimacy and access to resources necessary for their work. In cultural policy contexts, this tension becomes visible; artists must present themselves as both independent and institutionally compatible. The bureaucratic criteria of funding agencies may reward stability and reputation over innovation or marginal position, thus shaping artistic trajectories.

Additionally, the myth of autonomy persists in how artists describe their own practices. While many composers express a desire for independence from institutional constraints, their professional survival frequently depends precisely on engaging with those systems. This paradox reinforces the need for a sociological approach that neither idealises nor dismisses institutional support but investigates how it is experienced and evaluated by practitioners.

These frameworks are essential for analysing how Slovak composers negotiate between creative autonomy and bureaucratic expectations within the grant system. Bourdieu's field theory offers a lens to view this as a struggle for symbolic capital, while Sapiro's work highlights the complex dynamics of autonomy in institutionalised settings. This perspective emphasises that composers' strategies within the grant system are not merely individual preferences but are deeply shaped by their habitus – the internalised dispositions formed through education, professional socialization, and prior experiences with recognition or exclusion. Institutional funding thus becomes both a reflection and a reinforcer of the symbolic capital accumulated by agents in the field.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical data presented here stem from a quantitative research project carried out in 2023.

² Gisèle Sapiro, 'Autonomy and heteronomy of literature and the arts', in Brian James Baer, ed., *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 2011), 35–50.

The research focused on Slovak classical music composers, including both residents and those working abroad. Respondents were contacted directly via mailing list and social media platforms. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

In total, 70 composers were invited to participate in the study. The sample comprises 33 respondents, which represents approximately 47% of the estimated population of Slovak classical composers who actively create music. The survey contained 29 structured questions, mostly using Likert-type scales (five-point agreement or satisfaction levels), along with a few open-ended comment options.

The survey covered demographics (age, gender, region, professional background), grant application history, subjective evaluation of the application process, and satisfaction with various dimensions of support. The structure of the questionnaire, however, proved to be relatively complex for some respondents. As it distinguished between multiple types of grants (A–D), each with several subdimensions, several participants skipped portions of the questionnaire. This varied degree of completion is most evident in the sections concerning support for publishing, mobility, and technical equipment. Nevertheless, all respondents completed the core sections concerning support for creative work, allowing for robust analysis in that area.

The sample included both established and emerging composers, holding a range of professional positions: full-time employees, freelancers, and students. Notably, none of the respondents reported employment outside the cultural or music sector – a strong indication that the sample consisted of active and professionally engaged composers.

To ensure comparability across multiple questions, we constructed satisfaction indices for each key area (e.g. amount of support, administrative burden, communication) using a normalised scale from 0 (maximum dissatisfaction) to 1 (maximum satisfaction). This approach enables a more nuanced interpretation of aggregated patterns across dimensions.

The data were analysed descriptively, using frequencies, means, medians, and standard deviations, and graphically visualised in histograms and bar charts. The findings offer a valuable empirical insight into a community that is rarely studied systematically despite its crucial role in the national cultural production.

RESULTS

The main research findings have been structured into four thematic areas that reflect the core elements of institutional support as perceived by Slovak composers: general satisfaction, grant frequency and success, comparative institutional evaluation, and trust in transparency. All results are derived from a quantitative analysis of survey data and have been contextualised within the broader theoretical framework outlined earlier.

General Satisfaction with Support for Creative Work

The overall level of satisfaction with institutional support among composers was measured using a composite index derived from responses to multiple Likert-scale questions. The overall satisfaction index across all respondents was 0.49, which indicates a moderate level of satisfaction – neither strongly negative nor definitely positive. Within the sub-dimensions of satisfaction, the most favourable assessments were related to the amount of financial support provided, which yielded an index value of 0.61. Respondents generally acknowledged that the absolute value of the grants received was adequate for covering the intended scope of projects.

By contrast, the lowest levels of satisfaction were recorded for the administrative burden associated with the application and reporting process. This dimension produced an index score of only 0.39, suggesting that many composers experience the grant system as bureaucratically taxing. Qualitative comments echoed this concern, with several respondents indicating that the time and effort required to complete applications disincentivised them from participating regularly in calls for proposals.

Other dimensions, such as the number of applications allowed per year, communication with the funding body, and the time needed to prepare and submit proposals, received mixed evaluations. While some respondents appreciated the professionalism of communication, others reported delays or a lack of clarity. Overall, the breakdown of satisfaction scores reveals that the technical aspects of support (e.g. amount of funding, speed of response) are perceived more positively than procedural ones (e.g. administrative workload, number of applications possible).

The varied responses indicate that institutional support is not assessed monolithically but as a composite experience shaped by multiple interrelated factors.

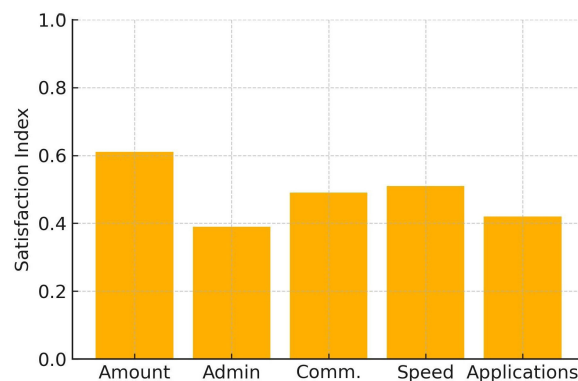


Figure 1. Satisfaction indices across dimensions.

Figure 1 presents a bar graph that visualises the distribution of satisfaction indices across five key dimensions (amount of support, administrative complexity, communication with grant provider, decision-making rate, number of applications that a single entity can submit in a year), offering a clear view of both perceived strengths and areas for improvement.

Frequency and Success of Grant Applications

Among the 27 respondents who provided relevant data, a total of 153 grant applications were submitted over a five-year period (2018–2023), indicating varying levels of engagement with the grant system. The distribution of applications suggests that while some composers are highly active as applicants, others, possibly facing barriers, submit fewer applications. The number of applications per respondent varied widely, from a single application to as many as 45, indicating a highly uneven pattern of engagement with grant systems.

The mean number of applications per composer was 6.96, while the median was 4.0. The relatively high standard deviation of 8.85 indicates the presence of a few highly active applicants, skewing the average upward. Most composers submitted only a few applications, while a small subset accounted for a disproportionate number of submissions.

When it comes to success rates, the picture appears relatively optimistic. Among the 24 respondents who reported their number of granted applications, the average number of successful grants was 4.78, corresponding to a collective success rate of 83.66%. This high rate suggests that once composers decide to engage with the system, their chances of receiving support are relatively high. However, caution is warranted in interpreting this

figure since not all respondents answered both questions (on total the number of applications and granted ones), these groups may not entirely overlap.

Qualitative feedback suggests that the administrative burden and the time required to prepare proposals may discourage some composers from applying frequently. Consequently, composers who submit fewer applications may not necessarily be less productive or less talented but they may be more reluctant or unable to navigate the bureaucratic process. This is particularly true of composers who are internationally successful and have access to alternative funding sources, such as direct commissions, as they may lack the time to dedicate to complex and time-consuming application procedures. This observation underscores the importance of considering procedural accessibility as a key factor in assessing the effectiveness of institutional support.

Institutional Comparison

In research comparing the perception of different funding institutions in terms of communication, financial adequacy, and administrative burden, respondents were asked to evaluate four types of institutions: the Slovak Arts Council (Fond na podporu umenia – FPU), the Music Fund (Hudobný fond – HF), regional grant schemes (regionálna dotačná schéma – RDS), and civic associations (OZ – občianske združenia). Each institution or its type was rated on a five-point scale, and summary statistics were calculated.

The Slovak Arts Council (Fond na podporu umenia – FPU), received the highest overall ratings despite being simultaneously associated with high administrative complexity. Respondents praised the relative clarity of its mission and the scope of supported projects but expressed concern about bureaucratic overload. The Music Fund (HF – Hudobný fond), by contrast, was perceived as more transparent and administratively efficient. Although its scale of support is smaller, respondents viewed its procedures as more stable and consistent.

Regional funding schemes and civic associations were less frequently utilised by composers within the sample. Still, the data offer insights into their comparative strengths and limitations. Civic associations (OZ), less formalised, were reported to impose fewer administrative demands. However, they lacked the institutional authority and financial power of the Slovak Arts Council (FPU) or the Music Fund (HF).

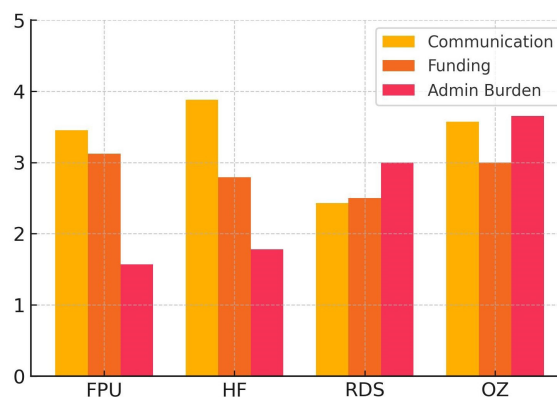


Figure 2. Comparison of institutional satisfaction by dimension.

A comparative bar chart (Figure 3) illustrates the average satisfaction ratings across three dimensions – communication, funding adequacy, and administrative burden – for each type of institution. This visualisation highlights the paradox that larger institutions, while better funded and more prominent, often generate greater procedural dissatisfaction.

Trust in Institutional Transparency

Trust in the transparency of funding decisions – particularly in the operations of the Slovak Arts Council (FPU) – represents a key dimension of institutional legitimacy. In the survey, 23 respondents evaluated their level of trust in the FPU on a five-point scale ranging from ‘I do not trust at all’ to ‘I fully trust’. The majority of responses clustered around moderate trust or neutrality, with only a small number expressing strong confidence or deep scepticism.

Interestingly, there appeared to be age-related differences in the evaluation of transparency. Among the youngest respondents (aged 18–29), trust levels were higher: two-thirds indicated a generally positive assessment. In contrast, older respondents, especially those over 50, were more critical, and some expressed outright distrust. This variation may reflect accumulated experience with institutional procedures or generational expectations regarding public accountability.

While the survey focused specifically on composers’ opinions on the Slovak Arts Council (FPU), some comments referenced broader concerns about the politicisation of cultural institutions. The study, therefore, not only reflects the levels of trust in grant

administration but also gestures toward a deeper question of legitimacy – how fairly and professionally decisions are made, and to what extent institutions are perceived as serving the artistic community rather than external agendas.

DISCUSSION

The above-presented results paint a nuanced picture of the institutional landscape that composers in Slovakia must navigate. On the one hand, the data show that composers are generally successful in obtaining funding. On the other, the low satisfaction scores related to administrative burden, communication, and limits on application frequency point to significant structural tensions.

These tensions resonate with Bourdieu's concept of the cultural field as an arena of struggle, where access to institutional support is influenced not just by artistic merit but by the ability to navigate bureaucratic hurdles. The implications for policy reform are clear. Without addressing these procedural barriers, grant systems risk perpetuating inequalities within the artistic community. The grant system, though ostensibly meritocratic, privileges those with pre-existing knowledge, institutional ties, or the time and skills to engage repeatedly with its bureaucratic mechanisms. Consequently, institutional access itself becomes a form of symbolic capital.

Moreover, Sapiro's insights into the dual logic of autonomy and recognition provide a useful lens for understanding why composers – despite dissatisfaction – continue to participate. They must maintain the appearance of autonomous creativity while demonstrating conformity to grant criteria, timelines, and evaluative language. This double bind structures the contemporary field of classical music production.

The respondents' ambivalence, as evidenced by moderate trust levels and mixed satisfaction ratings, suggests that the legitimacy of the grant system remains tenuous. While these systems are generally regarded as necessary, they are not perceived as entirely fair or inclusive. This fragile legitimacy becomes particularly apparent during institutional shifts, such as the recent changes within the Slovak Arts Council, where the entire board was replaced and the director was dismissed by the Ministry of Culture. The appointment of unqualified individuals to key committees, whose decisions may be disregarded or overruled by the new director, further undermines the system's continuity and transparency.

In this light, the findings not only reflect composers' attitudes but also reveal the latent conditions that shape cultural production: expectations of efficiency clash with the labour-intensive reality of artistic work, while ideals of equality are filtered through gatekeeping procedures. Recognising this complexity is essential for any serious effort to reform or sustain public cultural funding.

CONCLUSION

One key factor that emerged from the data, though not initially central to the research design, is the role of social capital – particularly in relation to composers' participation in decision-making bodies. The findings suggest that trust in grant institutions is not solely determined by formal criteria such as transparency or efficiency, which, while important, are taken for granted as fundamental conditions. Instead, trust is also shaped by perceived access to influence and insider knowledge. For example, the Music Fund (Hudobný fond), where composers are more frequently involved in the evaluation of applications, received higher trust and satisfaction ratings compared to the Slovak Arts Council (Fond na podporu umenia). This indicates that when artists encounter their peers as active participants in decision-making, their perception of the legitimacy and fairness of the institution is enhanced.

In this sense, social capital – understood as networks, affiliations, and symbolic proximity to decision-makers – plays a crucial mediating role in shaping composers' experiences of institutional support. Grant systems that fail to acknowledge or engage with this dynamic risk alienating parts of the artistic community, even if their formal procedures are sound. Cultural policy design should therefore not only prioritise procedural fairness but also foster participatory structures that involve active artists set in evaluative and advisory roles. Such inclusion may enhance not only the legitimacy but also the quality and relevance of supported artistic work.

Institutional support plays a critical role in maintaining the viability of contemporary classical music in Slovakia. This study shows, nevertheless, that the mere existence of funding mechanisms is not sufficient. For such systems to be perceived as legitimate and effective, they must be accessible, transparent, and responsive to the working conditions of artists.

The findings demonstrate that satisfaction does not directly correlate with success rates. Composers may receive funding, but if the administrative burden

is excessive or communication unclear, the process remains alienating. Moreover, the symbolic dimension of support – who gets recognised, whose projects are deemed worthy – significantly influences the perception of the institutions.

At the time of the research, the Slovak Arts Council (FPU) was operating with relative stability. However, recent political changes and shifts in leadership, including the dismissal of key board members and changes to grant structures, may further influence composers' perceptions of institutional legitimacy and their engagement with the grant system. Under the leadership of the new Minister of Culture, who assumed office in October 2023, the FPU has undergone substantial changes that have given rise to questions about its independence and functionality. The Ministry has increased its influence over the board by appointing the majority of its members. While the number of board members has been increased from nine to thirteen, seven of these positions are now occupied by individuals directly appointed by Minister, thus consolidating political control over the institution. Additionally, the Ministry has restructured the FPU's operations, including transformations in the expert commissions responsible for evaluating grant applications. These changes have provoked concerns about the politicisation of funding decisions and the erosion of the FPU's role as an independent body supporting the arts. While this study does not assess these recent changes directly, it provides a valuable snapshot of the system's strengths and limitations at a critical historical juncture.

This article serves as a record of institutional memory, providing critical insights that may guide future reforms in cultural policy. Specifically, the findings suggest that for grant systems to be both effective and sustainable, they must address the administrative burdens that limit accessibility while ensuring transparency and fairness in decision-making processes.

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Olga Smetanová has extensive experience in Slovak and international music institutions and festivals, including the Slovak Music Fund, Bratislava Music Festival, Melos Ethos Festival, European Music Council, and International Association of Music Centres (IAMIC), where she served as President. From 1999 to 2016, she was the director of Music Centre Slovakia, significantly enhancing its national and international reputation. During her tenure, she organised Slovakia's participation in events such as MIDEM, Classical:Next, and Musicora, and was involved in the development of EU projects such as Minstrel, DMET (Digital Music Education and Training), Criss Cross Europe, Re:NewMusic, and Renewable Music, among others. She has initiated numerous projects supporting composers and young talents. From 2022 to 2024, she served as the General Manager of the Prague Philharmonic Choir. She was also instrumental in establishing the Eufonie Festival in Warsaw, and served on its artistic committee. Currently, she is the chair of Waves Bratislava and the Secretary General of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM).
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