

Music Distribution 101

Music in a Digital Age

Whakahiato Puoro o Aotearoa
Music Enriches Aotearoa



NEW ZEALAND
MUSIC COMMISSION
TE REO REKA O AOTEAROA

Music distribution has rapidly evolved alongside the digital age. Thanks to modern technology, the ability to play and discover music is readily available at our fingertips. Within this physical and digital landscape where exactly do we find a home for our music, and how do we put it there?

This is a brief guide to digital distribution, and how to get your music online and available for current and future fans.



The Digital Music Market

Digital music has grown into a multi-billion-dollar market. With such demand, new music platforms are constantly emerging and there are many different avenues for people to engage with music.

Staying up to date with every single servicing platform would simply overwhelm us. What we can do is break them into categories.

There are three major types of digital music platforms:

- **Download** – such as iTunes, Bandcamp, Amazon Music, Qobuz
- **Streaming** – such as Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube Music, Soundcloud
- **Broadcast / Online Radio** – such as iHeartRadio

While these are considered the more notable platforms in Aotearoa, it's important to note there are many others. Some territories may have different platform preferences for their music - for example, the largest music platform in China is QQMusic (Tencent) - while some platforms have more of a niche genre focus. It's important to do some research on what platforms are more popular amongst your kind of music.

Many platforms will also offer a combination of services. For example, Beatport (a DJ/electronic music focused company) provides both download and streaming services on their platform. For the bulk of the above platforms, you will need to use an aggregator to add your music to their services – the exceptions to the aforementioned platforms include Bandcamp, Soundcloud, and iHeartRadio which you can approach directly with varying degrees of complexity.

Choosing an Aggregator

Major labels have their own deals with digital services and act as aggregators for the artists signed to them. For non-major labels and independent artists, you can source your own aggregator.

In Aotearoa, we have local aggregators including DRM (Digital Rights Management) and Precise Digital. There are also many other overseas aggregators such as TuneCore, DistroKid and CD Baby. Regardless of where they are based, most aggregators will upload your music to their scope of platforms, distribute earnings, and provide income statements. Many will also be able to provide analytics across the different platforms, so you can see metrics of your listener base and where across the world your listenership is coming from.



All aggregators will have their own financial model with their own terms and conditions. Like all business relationships, it is best to fully read and understand the contract before signing, what they are offering and what they are binding you to.

There are two types of aggregators:

- **Percentage based aggregators** – These aggregators take a cut/percentage of the income that you make from your streams/downloads. They may not charge a fee to start with but will likely subtract a percentage of your income prior to paying you. They may also charge you additional fees for processing with this being subtracted from your payments.
- **Flat fee aggregators** – These aggregators do not take a cut from your sales but instead charge you a flat fee annually. In some cases, you are free to upload as many releases you wish or there is a set limit which you can then upgrade.

It is important to consider the following when choosing an aggregator:

- **What stores do you want to be in? Are the major platforms like Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube Music, Deezer and Tidal enough, or are there specific regions or genre-focused services you need to be in?** It's important to do your research on your aggregator to see if their store scope covers the platforms and territories you'd like to see your music shared to.

- **What kind of reporting do you require and does the aggregator provide it?** Analytics can help you to understand your fans better, and where you can likely engage more fans. With comprehensive analytics, you can look to target your audiences more effectively.
- **Are you signing a roll-over or multi-year aggregator contract? What are the conditions if you choose to terminate your contract early?** It is important to consider opportunities (such as exclusive licensing) that may arise in the future which a multi-year contract could prohibit you from uplifting.
- **What territory or territories are you focusing on?** If you are primarily focusing on Aotearoa, it would be a good idea to sign with a local company for real-time help and support with local industry connections. If there are opportunities that arise that warrant exclusive territory agreements, it's important your aggregator's terms and scope allows for restricted delivery.

Ultimately, it's important to do some research, "shop around" and map out what you'd like to achieve with the tools and services your aggregator can provide. One of these services could be their ability to do an editorial pitch to specific digital platforms.



Editorial Coverage and Playlisting

Once we find a suitable home for our music, it brings us to our next question: how do we break out from the noise?

Another new consideration that streaming has brought about is the importance of playlists. All major streaming platforms tend to have both company generated and user generated playlists. Company generated playlists generally have a high number of follower and listeners. Each playlist is usually categorised by a different focus:

- **Genre** – such as Indie Arrivals, Rock Out
- **Mood based** – such as my life is a movie, Heartbreak Hits
- **Kaupapa based** – such as Waiata Reo Māori, EQUAL
- **Location based** – such as Local List Aotearoa, Kia ora Aotearoa
- **Time-sensitive** – such as New Music Friday, Top Songs New Zealand

All users of streaming platforms are allowed to create and share their own playlists. Some of these can also develop a large and active following.

Getting added to a popular playlist is a great way to both raise your profile and increase your streaming income. Many popular playlists often feed into others, so if you get on one playlist you may find five others quickly follow suit and playlist your tracks as well.

Some platforms have their own pitching tools within their “For Artists” interfaces – you can also access analytics and see how listeners engage with your music on the platform. Typically, you are only able to pitch one song at a time, and it’s wise to mention anything going on around your release that makes it stand out from the rest.

Another way to get on platform-generated playlists is through the efforts of your hard-working aggregator. Contact your aggregator and ask them to “pitch” a particular song for a specific playlist. If your aggregator has capacity, they will then pitch your song to the editorial teams. These teams will then review your music accordingly. Playlists tend to refresh on Fridays, synchronizing with chart refreshes around the world.

Your aggregator will be more inclined to support your release if you are organised with supporting material and have created some excitement around your release. Supporting material could include press releases, press images, interesting promotional strategies, upcoming shows, long term roll out plans etc. It is not imperative to have all of these to be pitched and having all of these does not guarantee pitching either – however, it helps to build a strong case for your aggregator and the platforms to support your release.



Regardless of whether your release is a self-pitch or delivered by your aggregator, your release must be ingested early. Aggregators have their own timelines they will advise, and self-pitch tools will also have their own schedules. It is important to consider the time processing, delivery and pitching takes when you are planning your release roll out.

If you are featured, it is key to share the release - don't let the playlist do all the work! It is likely that the editorial team tracks how well your release is performing on the playlist and how people are engaging with it i.e. are people saving it, are people skipping it, are people adding it to their own playlists? If you drive people to the playlist, you are facilitating a mutually beneficial playlist for the platform. This is likely to incentivise them to support your music again in the future.

If you are not featured, you cannot re-pitch your release in a self-pitch and it is important to keep your relationship professional with your aggregator. The selection process considers a multitude of criteria and variables, often outside of you and your aggregator's control, i.e. there could have been too many competing releases/factors in your week of release. Don't be discouraged – you can always pitch again with your next release.

Essentially, do your research and homework. Have a look at where you want to be placed editorially, what playlists really have a home for your music, what the artists already on the playlists are doing on their social media and what is really working for them. Do your homework by creating an EPK, keeping your social media up-to-date, getting creative and being organised with your delivery of materials to support your music.

