

2nd INTERNATIONAL FREELANCE CONFERENCE

Brighton, 21-22 October 2026

Final declaration *(version of 21 October 2026)*

Musicians and musicians' trade union representatives from around the world met in Brighton on 21 and 22 October 2026 for the second FIM International Freelance Conference, hosted by the Musicians' Union UK. Building on the first International Freelance Conference held in Copenhagen in 2019, participants addressed various aspects of freelance musical work and identified priorities for securing fairer, safer and more sustainable careers for freelance musicians

Freelance musicians are indispensable to musical life, cultural diversity and the wider creative economy. They perform, record, teach, and contribute their expertise across a wide range of musical activities. Yet many work in conditions of insecurity, with irregular income, weak contractual protection, limited bargaining power and inadequate access to social protection.

The conference recognised that freelance musicians have long formed part of the original "gig economy". While some musicians freely choose portfolio careers and value their diversity and flexibility, many others face unstable engagement patterns, unpaid work, low or unpredictable rates, excessive risk and difficulties in planning their professional and personal lives. The right to choose freelance work must never be used to deny musicians the rights and protections to which all workers are entitled.

Participants reaffirmed that all musicians, regardless of their employment status, contractual arrangement or work relationship, are entitled to fundamental labour rights, including freedom of association, effective trade union representation and the right to bargain collectively. These rights must apply in practice to all workers, including self-employed, freelance, intermittent, temporary, or project-based.

Recalling the conclusions adopted by the ILO Technical Meeting on the Future of Work in the Arts and Entertainment Sector in 2023, the conference stressed that all workers in the sector must enjoy access to labour and social protection, and that social dialogue and collective bargaining are central to building a sustainable and professional industry.

Fair pay and conditions

Freelance musicians must be paid fairly, promptly and transparently for all forms of work. Participants underlined the importance of collectively negotiated minimum rates, recommended fees and enforceable contractual standards as practical tools for preventing underpayment and improving conditions.

Rates must reflect not only performance time but also rehearsal, preparation, travel, cancellation, equipment, administration, training and other work that is necessary to sustain a professional career. Musicians must not be expected to subsidise the cultural sector through unpaid or underpaid labour.

Governments, public funders, and other decision-makers should ensure that the public and private funding of music supports decent work. Public money must not sustain business models that depend on precarious, unpaid or unfairly remunerated freelance labour.

Legal and social protection

Freelance musicians must enjoy effective legal protection and meaningful access to justice. They need clear written contracts, accessible advice, affordable dispute-resolution mechanisms and remedies that can be enforced in practice.

Participants called for universal access to comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection systems for all musicians, irrespective of their employment status or work relationship. Such protection must include self-employed workers and be adapted to the realities of intermittent, mobile and cross-border careers through portable

entitlements and a combination of contributory and non-contributory mechanisms where needed. No musician should be excluded from social protection or collective bargaining rights because of the legal form under which their work is organised.

Access to healthcare, unemployment protection, pensions, parental benefits, accident and occupational-injury protection, and other welfare rights must not depend on having a single permanent employer. Social-protection rights should be portable between engagements, sectors and countries.

Stronger union representation

Trade unions are essential to the protection and advancement of freelance musicians. Participants exchanged experience on organising freelance workers, developing dedicated services, recruiting younger musicians and ensuring that freelancers are represented in union structures and bargaining strategies.

Unions must continue to develop practical forms of support, including contract advice, legal assistance, rate guidance, professional information, collective advocacy and organising campaigns. Freelance musicians must be active participants in defining the policies and priorities that concern them.

Governments and employers should recognise unions as indispensable social partners. Meaningful dialogue with representative musicians' organisations is necessary when designing labour, cultural, social, digital and educational policies affecting freelance music professionals.

Equality and dignity

Freelance musicians must be able to work free from discrimination, harassment, bullying and all forms of unequal treatment. The risks of discrimination may be compounded by the insecure and individualised character of freelance work, particularly where access to engagements depends on informal networks or unequal power relations.

Participants called for effective measures to combat discrimination on all grounds, including gender, race or ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion or belief, and socio-economic background. Safe reporting procedures, robust protections against retaliation and genuine accountability are essential.

The music sector must promote equal access to work, fair representation and safe workplaces. Diversity and inclusion are not only matters of principle; they are conditions for a vibrant, innovative and sustainable musical life.

Sustainable portfolio careers

Portfolio careers form part of the musicians' professional reality. Many freelance musicians combine live performance, recording, teaching, and other forms of musical work in order to sustain an income.

This diversity must be recognised in policy and practice. Education, training, employment services, social-security systems and funding programmes should support musicians in developing sustainable careers rather than penalising them for moving between different forms of work.

Participants stressed that resilience and adaptability cannot replace fair terms of work. Musicians should not have to accept insecurity, poverty or the erosion of rights as the price of pursuing a diverse professional career.

Live music and recorded music

Live performance remains a vital source of income, artistic expression and public cultural participation. However, the conference noted the growing pressures on live musicians in an economy marked by limited resources, rising costs, constrained programming budgets and unequal bargaining power.

Musicians face growing barriers to international touring, including complex and costly visa and work-permit requirements, customs formalities for instruments and equipment, inconsistent tax rules, restrictions on cabotage and transport, and the lack of portability of social-security entitlements. These obstacles disproportionately affect freelance musicians and smaller ensembles, for whom administrative costs, delays and uncertainty can make international engagements financially unviable.

All actors in the live music ecosystem must take responsibility for fair engagement practices. This includes adequate fees, transparent terms, cancellation protection, safe working conditions and respect for musicians' professional status.

Recorded music is also an essential income stream for many freelance musicians. Performers must receive fair and equitable remuneration whenever their recorded performances are used, communicated to the public, broadcast, made available online or otherwise exploited.

Participants stressed the importance of strong performers' rights, effective collective management and full transparency from producers, broadcasters, platforms and other users. Digital exploitation must generate fair remuneration for the musicians whose performances create its value.

Participants noted that artificial intelligence is already transforming the work of musicians, creating serious risks for employment, remuneration, artistic control and professional identity. The development and use of AI systems must be human-centred and founded on transparency, prior authorisation, and fair remuneration. Musicians must be protected against the unauthorised use of their performances, voice, likeness, name, image and personal data, including for the training, development or operation of AI systems. Governments, employers, AI businesses and other digital services must engage in meaningful social dialogue with musicians' unions to ensure that technological innovation supports, rather than replaces or devalues, human creativity and decent work.

Call to action

The second FIM International Freelance Conference calls on governments, employers, cultural institutions, digital services and all music-sector stakeholders to:

- Recognise freelance musicians as workers and cultural professionals entitled to organise, to be represented and to bargain collectively.

- Remove legal and practical obstacles to collective bargaining by freelance and self-employed musicians, and establish incentives for employers and engagers to negotiate collective agreements with their representative trade unions.

- Guarantee the effective recognition of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining for all musicians, irrespective of contractual form or employment relationship.

- Promote collectively negotiated minimum fees, fair rates and enforceable contractual standards.

- Ensure universal access to comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection for all musicians, including self-employed and freelance workers, regardless of their employment status or work relationship.

- Guarantee social protection that is comprehensive, portable and adapted to intermittent and cross-border careers.

- Ensure accessible legal protection, effective dispute-resolution mechanisms and remedies for unpaid or unfairly treated musicians.

- Support union organising and meaningful consultation with representative musicians' organisations.

- Prevent discrimination, harassment and unsafe working conditions throughout the music sector.

- Ensure that public funding, cultural policy and procurement practices promote decent work and fair remuneration.

- Protect and strengthen performers' rights and collective-management systems as essential sources of income from recorded music.

- Ensure that the development and use of artificial intelligence in music are subject to transparency, prior authorisation, and fair remuneration, and protect musicians against the unauthorised use or imitation of their performances, voice, likeness, image, name and personal data.

- Put the economic security, dignity, artistic freedom and collective rights of freelance musicians at the centre of music, labour, cultural and digital policymaking.

The participants in the Brighton Conference reaffirm their commitment to international solidarity among freelance musicians and their unions. FIM and its affiliates will continue to organise, represent and defend freelance musicians, so that every musician can build a sustainable career, exercise their rights and contribute fully to the cultural life of society.