# Culminating Experience Thesis

Outcome Paper





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# Independent Record Label Operational Project

My experience as product manager for Disrupción Records

# Summary

Disrupción Records is an independent record label supported by Berklee College of Music, comprised by a core team of seven individuals from five different countries, and working with 28 artists from around the globe for international exposure with distribution through the Orchard under Sony Music. Currently housing a catalogue of artists spread across three imprints: EVLVE, Common Chord, and Disrupción; the label continues to expand with new signings and new releases. Formed in 2013, this is the first year the label has worked with artists outside the Berklee College of Music program, participated in the Berklee College of Music Valencia Campus "Musaico" live music festival, and added a synchronisation department, Fusión.

## Objectives

Disrupción Records has one main objective: to find and release unique talent that can "disrupt" the music scene. In order to achieve this goal, though, the team must unite under a common vision, delineate a plan and delegate roles, ensure this plan is understood with clear objectives and individuals claiming ownership of their duties with pride and integrity, and execute the mission while constantly re-assessing and communicating any obstacles.

My objective as product manager was to assist marketing and promotions in setting up strategies and timelines for artist releases, ensure these deadlines were being met, ensure the artists' needs were being met as well, and most importantly, getting the final "product" or package of the mastered tracks, metadata, and album art released to the world. I was acting as liaison between the label, artist and distributor. My other unofficial job titles included chief motivator, head strong-armer, top demander of the items, and vice herder of the team (Nicole Casino, the label manager, was the head in charge of that).

The product manager job is a fascinating and important aspect of the industry that is often neglected and overlooked, yet one of the most significant. If the metadata is not submitted accurately, then the appropriate parties do not get paid, and as a result the process is not sustainable (mainly for the artist). In order for the art to continue, the product manager must do their job meticulously and with great respect and ensure utmost accuracy. I spent numerous man-hours dealing with every issue thinkable and overcoming every obstacle imaginable, such as ordering an immediate take-down on the day of a single release for our Venezuelan artist due to a military coup being staged the same day causing political turmoil and unrest in the region (not ideal release conditions), or resolving metadata that was submitted incorrectly by the artist, as well as actually chasing down the artists to ensure correct information was acquired. It is a full-time job and hard work with not much recognition, but ultimately worth it in the end. One must take pride in a job well done and being part of a bigger cause: the success of the artist and the label.

#### Resources

Upon nomination of the team in October of 2018, the only initial resources provided were the guidance of our faculty representative, Mr. Pete Dyson with his

experience and sage-like wisdom; a facility to work in, the Berklee College of Music Valencia campus with rooms that had to be reserved hourly; and the hopes and dreams of the members involved. There was no turnover from the previous team, there was no money, and there were no current artists on the roster. Disrupción Records was merely an idea at that moment in time. The label was founded in 2013, but other than the name, it was completely dead upon our team's receipt. In fact, even worse, we were operating in the negative: the already established "Disrupción Records" email accounts, social media pages, and web sights (to mention only a few examples) were inaccessible due to the absence of turnover. Nobody in the current team had the passwords and in order to make any sort of progress, we were forced to identify and track down the previous team and obtain the information as well as the passwords. This was not an easy task and time consuming, not the ideal launching point.

Embarking on this uphill battle, it would take pure and honest hard work as a unit to start gaining traction, to resurrect Disrupción Records, building it from the ground up. It was Nicole Casino as label manager, Alexjandra Edwards and Nicole Otero on marketing and promotions, Eleonora Muraglia and Camila Anino on Artist and Repertoire, and myself as Product Manager. We were up to challenge, staring in the face of adversity.

#### Tasks

Once the glow of being handpicked to work on the label subsided and the hype of being selected as one of the chosen few calmed, a mountain of tasks loomed over the team to an almost overwhelming extent. Comparable to an excited canine chasing its tail, we were a crew with boundless energy and no real unified direction other than the goal to change the world through music. We were eager as

to what we were getting into but simultaneously also not quite sure exactly what we were getting into. What was our identity? What kind of artists do we want to sign? What type of music did we want to release? What was everyone's roles? What exactly is a "product manager"? Our team came from such a widespread area and backgrounds and histories and upbringings. Everyone had somewhat of an idea of what they as an individual wanted, but where we were headed as a team was a completely different idea altogether. But just like every daring journey, we began with a first step: our's being determining the label's identity.

Traditionally, the advantage of an independent label is their fierce identity complimented by a very niche market. Indie labels are the maestros of cultural knowledge in their specific field and usually the premier in identifying up and coming talent as well as future trends. The indies are on the streets, at the venues, experiencing the live performances, feeling the pulse of scene, soaking up the energy firsthand. They are the revolution. Our label, on the contrary, was a hybrid-label of sorts.

To set the scene, Berklee College of Music was founded in 1945, post-World War II in the Schillinger House in Boston by Lawrence Berk as the first jazz music conservatory in the United States1. Since then, Berklee College of Music has evolved from solely jazz to contemporary music, incorporating a plethora of different styles and genres. From it's inception in 2013, Disrupción Records worked solely with Berklee College of Music artists, an impressively talented and diverse lot, these musicians possessed world-class technical abilities in instruments spanning all corners of globe from the saxophone to the ude, the piano to the djembe, from Sweden to South Korea, and Venezuela to India. As wonderful as this may initially

<sup>1</sup> https://www.berklee.edu/about/brief-history

appear, it was a double-edged sword, there were only two common factors for us as a label to base our identity on: diversity and Berklee.

How was an independent label going to form an identity on these two principles? To add to the complexity, the team unanimously agreed to try and sign artists outside the Berklee network, which meant we were now down to only one common factor: diversity. This was indeed a very large and difficult initial obstacle to overcome from the start! We had to figure out a way to somehow group together artists from around the globe, playing different genres and styles of music, some part of the Berklee program and some not, and altogether being backed by an institution formed as a jazz conservatory all the while being located in Valencia, Spain with some fixed assets but virtually zero financial backing.

Next task, and very significant for my role, was to determine our distributor. With a wide variety of options to choose from, the distributor chosen would also be a direct correlation with the caliber and quality of label. It would be a major aspect in defining who we actually were and the type of artists we wanted to work with. Did we want to go full-indie and stick to a more of Do It Yourself (DIY) type company or did we want to shoot for the stars and go with a bigger corporation, making us seem more legitimate? Did we want more attention and care from the distributor with a smaller reach or associate the label with a giant name and be just another independent label in a sea of others? Did we want physical distribution or stay purely digital? Did we want to target solely the United States even though we were in Spain or did we want international exposure? With so many options to consider, one thing remained certain, we were definitely going to need to use the Berklee network in making this idea a reality.

The previous team utilized CD Baby, a company that is a friend of Berklee, and they received some free swag and physical distribution as a result. CD Baby is a great company with a solid business model and just small enough in comparison to other large distributors to give Disrupción the attention we would want, but as a downside it is also accessible by anyone, so the it would not be a defining asset. Although we would get some potential free product from CD Baby, the distributor would not be a major selling point for the label to our potential artists.

Another possibility was the Orchard. The co-founder, Scott Cohen, is a friend of the Berklee family and came to speak at a Global Entertainment and Music Business seminar earlier in the year. His company had been picked up by Sony Music in 2015 and merged with RED in 2017, still keeping the Orchard name and making the company the biggest independent record label distributor in the industry<sup>2</sup>. This would be a good fit for the team due to the company's humble roots, its impressive merger with RED and acquisition by Sony which could be used as a selling point for potential artists, and again, having Scott as a friend of Berklee is a major plus. Additionally, the founding team of Disrupción in 2013 used the Orchard as a distributor before the company was acquired by Sony, so there is some history, and to further promote the decision, there are some Berklee alumni currently working at the company, so it should be much simpler getting the operation up and running again.

Next item on the list of to-do's was the five year anniversary of the label and our intention in recognizing this moment of importance. Possible actions were a compilation album with all of the artists signed by our the team this year or host an

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  <a href="https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8496258/orchard-scott-cohen-retirement">https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8496258/orchard-scott-cohen-retirement</a>, 2/4/2019 by <a href="mailto:Billboard.Staff">Billboard.Staff</a>

event, a showcase of sorts, including Disrupción artists. Major issue with both of these ideas is that we in fact at the time did not have any artists to work with.

An additional task that was put out by the team is involvement in the Musiaco music festival that was set to occur in May this year. This festival is a big deal for the program's live-concentration members and it would be a great way to bridge the gap with the record practicum students and the live practicum students. The festival brings in significant fanfare (generally in the thousands), and would be great exposure for a Disrupción Records' artist. In return, we as a label would provide talent for the live event and assist in promoting the festival. It was a win-win situation for both parties involved, and would be another first for Disrupción Records by taking part in this new venture.

On to the next task: marketing and promotion plans. This is a very enjoyable aspect of the job as product manager by working directly with the marketing and promotion department, strategizing new releases, coming up with different promotion ideas, and keeping an overarching view on all of the artists involved to push maximum exposure, rhythm of advertisement, and frequency of releases. There is much strategic thinking involved with the process and a requirement to see the bigger picture while simultaneously making achievable plans. As the product manager you are not required to come up with the actual marketing or the promotion, but you are there to ensure it all fits and makes sense, that all of the wickets are getting hit and all of boxes are getting checked.

Rolling out the schedule following the planning sessions and driving the agenda to meet the set objectives, going live to attain prescribed goals, adhering to timelines, and hitting the mark of desired outcome is a beautiful work of art in itself.

With so many moving parts and so many things that could go wrong, it is a constant

movement, an enduring strain to keep forward progress. Fortunately, Disrupción Records had an all-star marketing and promotion team and it was a pleasure to alongside them.

The final task was to come up with a turnover plan for the upcoming

Disrupción Records team, so they did not have to start in the negative like we did,
costing precious time and resources for an already extremely tight timeline and
accelerated program. To paint a clearer picture of the current flaws that existed,
nominations for the newest team were not finalized until the end of October and the
previous team graduated in early July. This left a four month gap where absolutely
nothing was happening with the label, and by the time the whole password-fiasco
was resolved and access-issues were rectified we lost nearly an entire additional
month before the team was gaining any traction and relatively operational. There is
a great need to set the upcoming team up for success, and a new process to resolve
the time gap that is a major concern for the artists.

## Risks

From the get go, there was virtually zero risk, especially financially, for the Disrupción Records team. The major benefit of starting up or being a part of any independent music label is that it takes little to zero capital, more importantly it takes vision, careful planning, and an incredible ability to adapt. There's almost a sixth sense required in order to succeed, which cannot be bought, acquired, or learned through an organized institution, but rather learned through experiencing it firsthand. That being said, the only actual risks involved would be failing as a team and not achieving the goals we set out for at the beginning. Not forming an identity, not producing any product, not learning a new set of skills would constitute a failure.

To be honest, the majority of the risks are with the artists due to the short tenure of label team, quick churn from start to finish, and gap between teams. The most important trait the label has with the artist is trust and this takes time and effort, not something that can be turned over to the new team. And just like a company being restructured, acquired, or merged, without an original member from the company still involved, there's a high likelihood of a shift in priorities, which could help or hurt the artist.

For example, Mayani Swave is one of the Disrupción Records most prized artist, even to the extent that we managed to fly him out to play a stage at the Musaico Music Festival. Swave is from the Dominican Republic, and the only reason we were able to establish any sort of contact and rapport with this artist is because we had an individual from Dominican Republic on the team this year. There is a possibility of not having a representative from the Dominican Republic on the team next year, and this would greatly affect relations with the artist, most likely in a negative manner. It is very difficult, if not impossible to maintain the artist roster and this is the biggest risk for the team.

#### Outcomes

Commencing with the initial task of identity, in keeping with the label's main objective of "disrupting the music scene" and amidst the team's development best surmised by Bruce Tuckman's article "Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing"<sup>3</sup>, the team got creative in achieving a clear identity while also incorporating diversity and Berklee's longstanding history: imprints. Much like a collective or group, such as Unspeakable, Secretly or Beggars, Disrupción Records decided to create three imprints to fortify a strong overarching identity, but also

<sup>3</sup> Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. Psychological Bulletin, 63(6), 384-399. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0022100

maintain the ability to sign a plethora of talents an artists. Thus, Common Chord and EVLVE were born.

Common Chord would be Disrupción's nod to the Berklee College of Music's roots when it was founded in 1945 as a jazz music conservatory. It would focus on more instrumental items with a strong emphasis on jazz and classical. The A&R department did not spend much time with this imprint, but we were able to sign an Indian film scoring producer, Srikant Krishna, to license one of his film scores with us.

EVLVE was created for the broader spectrum of up and coming artists, mainly those enrolled in the program and seeking development and nurturing. Disrupción Records' first signing, Nathan Dies, an undergraduate student originally from Brazil, was placed in this imprint. It was great to be able to work with these artists directly, provide them feedback, nurture them, and watch them grow.

To complete the grouping, Disrupción Records still maintained the overarching imprint adding the artists we felt were of the highest quality, best caliber, and most in keeping with label's vision. Mayani Swave, Autumn Jones, rosewood., Sara Neal were all directed into this imprint. The A&R department spent most of their time focusing on finding and working with these types of artists.

Another part of Disrupción Records worth mentioning is the newly added Fusión synchronisation department. Headed by Mariano Hernandez Garcia and Rea Shena, this is the first year the label has reached into the synch sector. Initially, and once again, this was a difficult sell due to our lack of catalogue, but when the label continued to add more substance, Mariano and Rea managed to secure a synch deal. Very exciting stuff for the label and new progress made!

Next task and the most directly applicable to my job responsibilities, the distributor. The team decided to go with the Orchard as our distributor due to its international reach comprised of local representatives in more than 40 global markets, impressive work with artists such as T-Pain, City and Colour, Hippo Campus (a personal favourite), and Jacob collier to name a few, and most of all the acquisition by Sony Music. The Orchard's label and artists received a total of 60 nominations at the 2019 Grammy Awards. If this is not a convincing reason to use the Orchard as a distributor or a significant reason for potential artists to sign with Disrupción Records, I'm not sure what else would be. Combined with the other positive aspects, such as having Scott Cohen in our corner and Berklee alumni currently working at the Orchard, it was a no-brainer to choose this route. Only one issue stood in the way, how does one go about officially getting a distributor?

Luckily, through extensive research, talks with previous teams, and Friday morning business seminars, I was able to establish contact with Sammy Pisano, a Berklee alumni and current Orchard employee at the New York City international office that was able to point me in the right direction:

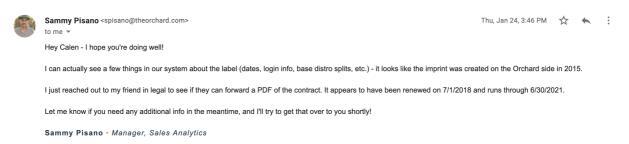


Figure 1. Original email with Sammy Pisano, Manager, Sales Analytics for the Orchard on 24 Jan 2019

This was great news for Disrupción and a big win for the team. We now had an official distributor and an impressive one at that. Our A&R team could start using the Orchard as the official distributor of Disrupción Records as a selling point for the potential artist signings, increasing our legitimacy and value, and in return the quality of artists we could add to our roster. We could start moving product and adding to our catalogue as soon as we received it, but now we just needed to get it, and even more importantly learn the Orchard's platform and procedural compliance in order to successfully release the tracks to the world. This was much more complicated than initially expected.

The Orchard has a beautifully designed platform with a sleek and user-friendly interface, but there are some strange encounters with operating procedures that are not mentioned in the Frequently Asked Question's (FAQs) section and the user only discovers them through trial and error. The first and most glaring missing item is there is no real "How to use this platform" written document or introductory video. There is a help section, but this is mainly only helpful if the user encounters an error, not in preventing one. Logging into the Orchard the user is greeted with a main page:

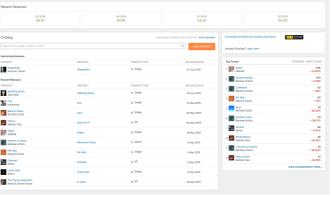


Figure 2. Home page workstation for Disrupción Records utilizing the Orchard interface on 15 Jun 2019

It is fantastic and easy to read visual, getting an immediate view of quarterly revenues and catalogue history displayed by Product, project, format/type, and release date as well as also incorporating a column of top tracks, but the main issues occur when actually uploading the new product:

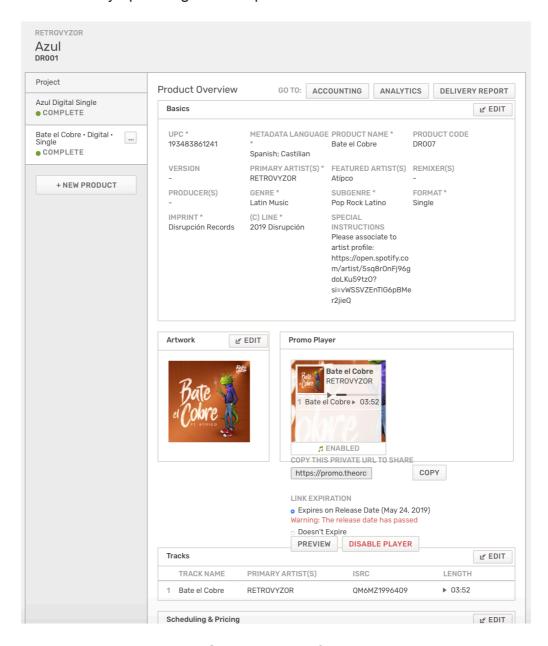


Figure 3. Product Overview page for Disrupción Records artist RETROVYZOR utilizing the Orchard interface on 15 Jun 2019

First off, the Orchard website is only compatible with apple safari. This was a long and confusing lesson learned that could have been prevented and save a lot of time and effort if it was clearly identified from the start. I am unsure whether or not it is compatible with PC browsers such as Internet Explorer or Firefox, but the website does not work with Google Chrome.

Second item, processing time. The Orchard states that it usually takes four to six weeks for a digital track to go live in stores and two business days to correct any mistakes made. This is generally not the case. Experience has proven that it takes an average of 15 days for digital tracks to go live with ten days being the quickest. As far as corrections to already released items goes, I still have outstanding issues that have not been resolved and I am waiting for the Orchard to fix.

Third item, formatting. Many artists are very concerned with the pure aesthetics of the visual text displayed for track, even outside the actual song. For example some artists or label managers prefer "featured" over "feat." over "ft." This is not an option for the client.

Fourth item, artist profile association. Another issue encountered was ensuring the artist was correctly connected to their already existing Spotify/Apple/ Deezer account or that a new one is created. For example, Alex Rapp, a MPTI graduate program student released a track on the Women in Music album, and she does not have an artist profile on all the main streaming services. The Orchard took the liberty of accidentally associating her with a much different Alex Rapp, a hardcore German rapper with songs such as "Hande hoch" or "Kopf Zu". There is no official section for already existing artists using the Orchard for the first time to enter in their artist profile link, nor is there an area to indicate if the artist has an artist profile at all.

Fourth item, universal link. This has been a request from the Disrupción team from the very start and there still has not been any movement on the distributor side. There is a section for each individual direct service provider (DSP) link such as a Spotify link, an Apple link, a Deezer link, etc. but a single universal link grouping all the DSPs together for the artist and label to use. This would be greatly helpful due to the growing number of different streaming platforms and consumers using different platforms as a result.

Fifth item, using DSP features such as back playing video. Spotify especially is loaded with numerous features that would make a Disrupción artist's page stand out more (such as back playing videos instead of album art), yet we as the distributors client are unable to use the features. Again, there has been no response as to the resolution of this issue. This is not a game-changer but a nice feature for the client to have available.

Sixth item, painstakingly meticulous attention to detail is required with regards to the artist metadata. Another fun lesson learned is the crucial match-up of the file name (.wav) to the actual track name the artist desires. If this is not identical, the track will get rejected (usually after waiting for two weeks as it is processing), and one must wait another two weeks after the changes have been made and resubmitted.

Ultimately, the six aforementioned items are the main technical issues in regards to the outcomes using the Orchard as a the distributor for Disrupción Records. The most significant problem encountered would have to be the response time and working with client services. It is great that the Orchard is huge and under Sony Music and received 60 grammy noms this year. It is fantastic when it come to making Disrupción Records more legitimate and respectable, but ultimately being a

part of this giant business means just that. Disrupción is but a mere small piece, a cog in this massive machine, a minnow in an ocean of fish and when it comes down to it, and the already overtasked sales analytics manager has to choose between T-Pain or Mayani Swave, the manager is going to choose T-Pain as a higher priority. This can be frustrating for all parties involved especially when issues arrive and the response time is achingly slow, but these are the consequences associated with working in the big leagues and with a distributor used by thousands of independent labels. All in all, I successfully managed the product of 28 global artists, with new products and upcoming releases on the way.

Continuing along to the proceeding task identified, the Five year anniversary of the label. After getting team together for one of our weekly synch events, we decided by unanimous decision to host an official event to celebrate the anniversary and help promote the upcoming Musaico Music Festival. Alexjandra Edwards in Promotions did a fantastic job of organising the event and it went off without a hitch. A truly wonderful event, good times were had by all.

Next task, promotion and marketing plans with Nicole Otero of marketing.

Heavily social media driven, Nicole and I would be in constant communication of planned release dates, major upcoming events, and promotions. She would ensure the social media world was fully aware of any and all music coming from Disrupción Records.

Finally, the last major task was to prepare an all-encompassing turnover plan for the upcoming team. Nicole Casino, as the Label Manager, took this task under her wing and compiled a list for each department, including all passwords for social medias, web pages, emails, etc. as well as the contract for distribution through the Orchard, if desired by the oncoming team. The only final item to work out is to brief

the new GEMB academic fellow to ensure they can hold down the label until the new team arrives.

To cap off the report, I would like to share the data gathered from the Orchard as my tenure as Product Manager to give a more visual representation of the work accomplished. The label has garnered nearly 30,000 streams in total and is most popular with Dominican females aged 18-24:

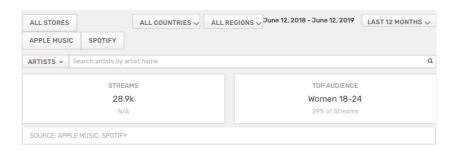


Figure 4. Total Streams and Top Audience for Disrupicón Records artists from the past 12 months as of 12 Jun 2019.







Figure 7. Top Countries and Top Regions for Disrupicón Records artists for the past 30 days as of 12 Jun 2019.

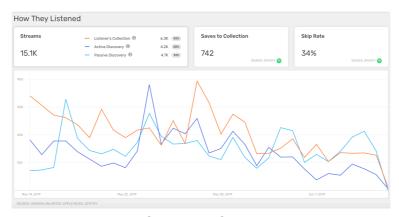


Figure 8. Types of listeners for Disrupicón Records artists for the past 30 days as of 12 Jun 2019.



Figure 9. Gender and age of listeners for Disrupicón Records artists for the past 30 days as

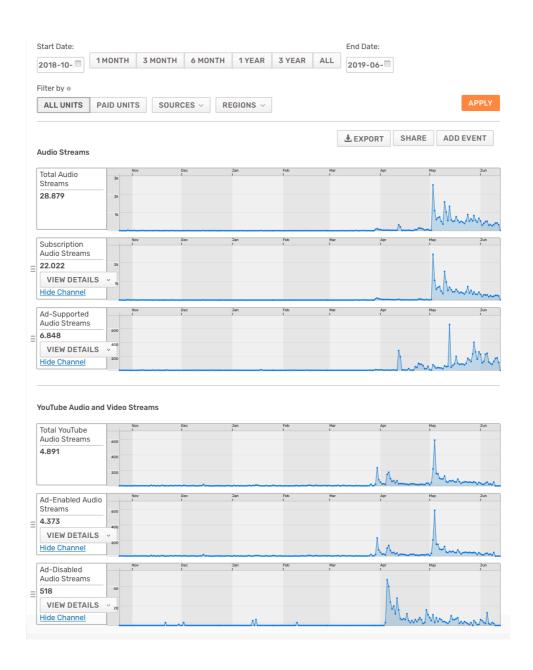


Figure 10. Total Audio Streams and YouTube Audio and Video Streams for Disrupicón Records artists for the past from nomination date of 24 Oct 2018 to 12 Jun 2019 as of 12 Jun 2019.

OURCE	REPORTING FREQUENCY	CHANNELS	FEED START DAT
247	Daily	Subscription Audio Streams	2009-09-28
amazon MP3	Daily	Album Download, Track Download	2012-07-10
music   unlimited	Daily	Subscription Audio Streams, Mid-Tier Subscription Audio Streams	AT - 2018-05-01 AU - 2018-05-01 DE - 2018-05-01 ES - 2017-10-01 FR - 2017-10-01 IT - 2017-10-01 US - 2017-10-01
DEEZER	Daily	Subscription Audio Streams, Ad-Supported Audio Streams	2010-01-28
facebook	Daily	Fans Gained, Fans Lost, Facebook Impressions*	Different for every
Google Play	Daily	Video Download, Video Rental, Subscription Audio Streams, Download Albums, Download Tracks	2014-10-02
hulu	Daily	Subscription Video Stream, Ad-Supported Video Streams	2009-11-25
<b>1</b>	Daily	Album Download, Track Download, Ringtone Download, Video Download, Subscription Audio Streams	2007-01-01
pandora°	Daily	Subscription Audio Streams, Non-interactive Radio, Mid-Tier Subscription Audio Streams	2016-11-29
napster	Daily	Subscription Audio Streams	2015-07-01
Spotify <sup>®</sup>	Daily	Subscription Audio Streams, Ad-Supported Audio Streams	2012-06-01
XBOX	Daily	Video Download, Video Rental	2012-02-05
You Tube	Weekly	Ad-Enabled Audio Streams, Ad-Enabled Video Streams, Ad- Disabled Audio Streams, Ad-Disabled Video Streams	2012-05-14

Figure 11. Data Sources used by the Orchard as of 12 Jun 2019.

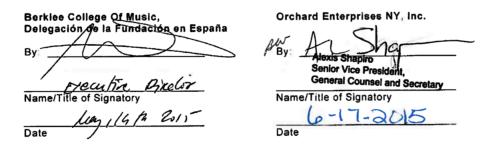


Figure 12. Most recent distribution contract signed by Berklee College of Music and Orchard Enterprises on 17 Jun 2015 as of 12 Jun 2019.

#### Conclusion

Ultimately, the experience as Product Manager for Disrupción Records proved to be a resounding success; very fruitful in knowledge gained, and significant development as an indvidual through real-life experience and demonstration of ability to manage a long-term project. There remains no better way of learning than by doing. In combination with the fostering environment of Berklee College of Music Valencia Campus with the guidance of Professor Pete Dyson, this was a very unique experience that has increased my abilities as a professional and in return the music industry as a whole. My only major concern is the the artists involved, all of which were informed of the temporary nature of the Disrupción Records team, but some of which did not fully comprehend. I still foresee having minor turnover issues with the oncoming team, but with the new procedures implemented, the label will be in a much better place.