iMusicTech to Expand the Hong Kong Music Industry through Metaverse
iMusicTech 以元宇宙優勢擴建香港音樂產業

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The COVID-19 pandemic has heavily impacted businesses across industries, the main one being our music and entertainment industry. Stakeholders of the industry such as artists, composers, record label companies had received significantly less opportunities, including prolonged COVID measures that have left the staff jobless. However, many believe that Metaverse will seep into all aspects of life and into every industry, including music and entertainment. The term "Metaverse" is simply marrying two words "meta" and "universe". It describes both present-day and foreseeable integrated digital platforms with a concentration on immersive interconnected virtual and augmented reality.

What does that mean for the music and entertainment industry? Mr. Kenneth Chau, CEO & Founder of iMusicTech believes Metaverse presents a brand new virtual arena for music appreciation, sharing and interaction, and could be the very next prominent trend developed during the pandemic era and beyond. Rising popularity of digital concerts as a new revenue stream has now become one of the unlocked opportunities for musicians and brands in Hong Kong, opening a myriad of opportunities for connected and immersive entertainment alternatives.

新冠肺炎疫情為各行業帶來龐大影響，當中以音樂及娛樂產業最為首當其衝。藝人、創作人、唱片公司等持份者的機遇大減，恆久的防疫政策更使部分工作人員失業。然而，社會上不少人認為元宇宙將會滲入生活上每一個範疇及行業，包括音樂及娛樂產業。元宇宙（英語：Metaverse）一詞由'Meta'（意思為超越）及'verse'（意思為宇宙）組合而成，它由現存和即將出現的綜合數字平台構成，是一個結合虛擬實境及擴增實景、為用戶提供沉浸式體驗的空間。

iMusicTech（科韻動力）的創辦人及行政總裁鄒健宏相信，元宇宙是一個讓人欣賞、分享音樂及互動的革新虛擬平台，下一個疫情及後疫情時期的關鍵趨勢很可能就是元宇宙。隨著虛擬演唱會越趨普及，他演變成產業的收入來源之一，開拓了音樂人與品牌、以及一連串連接現實及虛擬娛樂世界的機遇。

Where the Future of Hong Kong Music Industry Lies?

Digital concerts were first introduced to the world in the late 90s, unfortunately its recognition was hampered due to a lack of incentive. Not until the global pandemic lockdowns started, Chau acknowledges the music industry had to find a way to keep their workers' jobs and their fans engaged, prompting another wave of virtual concerts in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

That's why iMusicTech was born, defining the next norm in Hong Kong's entertainment industry. iMusicTech is an information technology company in Hong Kong. Its name represents interactive music technology, meaning that it develops interactive music technologies from software to hardware, serves as a platform to discover more music talents in the local community and ultimately promotes the application and integration of Metaverse concept in Hong Kong's entertainment industry. Additionally, Chau is dedicated to incorporating blockchain technology in the entertainment industry in a bid to secure copyrights to artists, ensure fair bidding of concert tickets, and improve user experiences within the Metaverse. In the long run, Chau would like to explore broader collaborations with both local and global music companies or music streaming platforms, such as KKbox and Spotify. And since music fans and how they consume music are the main drivers of Hong Kong's entertainment industry, iMusicTech encourages industry stakeholders to actively expand their audience base to keep the growth sustainable.

Thanks to the thriving development of livestreaming tools and online platforms, more and more audiences are more eager to switch to digital concerts. Chau added that the market of the millennial generation should not be overlooked, who are constantly hungry for fun and unconventional experiences. Video game concerts were established by means of the Metaverse; performers' can be presented on stage as a virtual figure - everything can be just as exciting as traditional shows. The main feature of virtual music concerts is that it facilitates more communications between the artists and their fans, keeps live music performances as vivid as in-person events, and ultimately be able to tap into a much larger audience base around the world. Virtual productions have highlighted some new and better ways of creating interactive content, which could also be beneficial to live events organization after the year-long hiatus.

未來的香港音樂產業

綫上演唱會這個概念於九十年代末首次露相，無奈因缺乏誘因發展而使其認可性受限。鄒先生表示，疫情使全球封城，音樂業為保障員工的工作及維持歌手與歌迷的互動，才令綫上演唱會於疫情當中再次被提起及發展。

定義香港娛樂產業的下一個新常態就是 iMusicTech 設立的原因。iMusicTech 是一個立足香港的資訊科技公司。它的名稱代表 interactive music technology（音樂互動科技），意味著它的業務涵蓋了發展音樂互動科技的軟硬件設備、發掘更多本地音樂人才、以及推動元宇宙於香港娛樂產業的應用與結合。另外，為了保障藝人的版權、確保演唱會售票的公平性、及改善用家在元宇宙的體驗，鄒先生致力將區塊鏈技術融入娛樂產業。長遠而言，他希望與本地及國際音樂公司或串流平台，例如 KKbox 及 Spotify 夥拍。有見於音樂聽眾及他們的音樂消費習慣為香港娛樂產業的主要推動力，iMusicTech 鼓勵音樂業裏的持份者主動擴大他們的觀眾群，以促進業務的持續發展。

有賴於直播及其他網上平台的蓬勃發展，更多觀眾願意觀看虛擬演唱會。鄒先生補充，千禧世代有不斷地尋找樂趣及非傳統的體驗的特性，因此不容忽視千禧世代的市場。video game concert（電玩演出）經由元宇宙設立，表演者能以虛擬影像出現於舞臺上，觀眾能獲得與實體演唱會一樣的精彩體驗。虛擬演唱會的最大特色是它促進了藝人與歌迷之間的溝通，使演唱會直播也能如真實一樣生動，全球的觀眾都能參與其中。虛擬製作提出了一些更先進的方式創作互動內容，亦有助團體舉辦實體活動。

Virtual Concert Could be the New Face of Industry

Chau indicated that 75% of local artists left the Hong Kong music industry in the last 20 years, which marked the old golden days of Cantopop. The Metaverse concept will unleash more opportunities for young musicians and find a place in the playlists of future generations again.

iMusicTech has been working on creating a virtual community for local artists in Hong Kong, where land is very limited and not everyone has the privilege to watch live concerts. It is often difficult to purchase a ticket due to large demand from the public and limited seats available at the auditorium. Social distancing rules from COVID-19 have significantly reduced the number of tickets available. Since there is no more seating limit in the virtual world, artists can enjoy the unique privilege of accommodating as many audiences as they want and mitigate the likelihood of having ticket shortage. Location of the concert is no longer relevant, and international fans won't feel left out anymore.

Another advantage suggested by Chau is the facilitation of interactions between artists and the audience. Lockdowns from the pandemic have made us realise the importance of social interactions. Interactive digital experiences represent an opportunity for performers to design their own digital universe, and bring their fans into their own mindset. Through the use of avatars, a graphical representation of the audience, everyone joining the concert would be able to walk around freely within the virtual space and select the best viewing angles whichever they find enjoyable. Audiences can also interact with each other. Some online streaming platforms allow the participants to chat with others in a comment section, recreating the feelings of them being in the presence of real-world concert venues. Interactions are not only limited under the virtual stages. Performers can also engage their fans online in a more personal manner. For instance, fans could request a song and performers could respond directly in real time. Recently, iMusicTech has collaborated with several local artists such as Hins Cheung, to increase exposure of his virtual concerts. Both Hins Cheung and his fans get an individual avatar so that they can interact during the virtual concert.

What makes an online concert unforgettable? Interactivity is undoubtedly one of the most crucial elements to Metaverse's long-term success. Headphones in Metaverse driven performances have been designed to collect biometric data from users such as dancing and cheering gestures and heat rates. These data will be sent across the Metaverse space in order for their digital avatars to be animated properly. However it is crucial to keep the data collection process transparent and assure users' digital rights are well protected. Another way for mapping more lifelike avatars is to use faceware technology in facial emotions design. By incorporating more human-like characteristics and movement into the virtual world, a more seamless user experience will be fashioned.

虛擬演唱會—音樂產業的新趨勢

鄒先生指出，過往二十年間有 75% 本地藝人離開香港本土樂壇，廣東歌的黃金時期已成過去。元宇宙將會為年輕音樂人釋放更多機會，令廣東歌在香港新一代的歌單中仍能佔一席位。

香港土地有限，加上實行了社交距離措施，演唱會門票供不應求的情況日趨嚴重。有見及此，iMusicTech 一直致力為本地藝人打造一個虛擬社區。虛擬演唱會沒有人數上限，主辦單位可以隨心決定觀眾的數量，大幅減少了門票短缺的出現。世界各地的歌迷也能同時參與，因此演唱會的舉辦地點也不再是考慮因素。

虛擬演唱會另一個優勢則是促進了藝人與觀眾之間的交流。疫情間的隔離政策讓我們了解到社交的重要性。互動數碼體驗讓表演者設計一個專屬他們的 digital universe（數碼宇宙），並把歌迷帶進他們的所思所想。透過使用數碼人像，觀眾能在演唱會的虛擬空間中遊逛，獲得理想的觀看角度。觀眾之間亦具互動性，某些串流平台會開放評論區供觀眾討論，為觀眾塑造身處實體演唱會的感覺。表演者亦能與觀眾有更多個人互動，例如歌迷向歌手點歌後，歌手可以即時給予回應。近期，iMusicTech 與本地藝人合作，以提升他們虛擬演唱會的曝光率，當中包括了張敬軒的虛擬演唱會。張敬軒與他每一個的歌迷都以數碼人像在演唱會中互動。

互動性除了使網上演唱會深刻難忘，也是其中一個令元宇宙成功的關鍵因素。元宇宙中表演所使用的耳機經過精心設計，可以搜集用家的生物特徵，如心跳率、跳舞及歡呼時的動作。這些數據會被傳送去元宇宙空間，使數碼人像能與現實用家同步行動。然而，確保收集資料的過程公開透明，及保障用家的網上權益是極其重要的。另一種提升數碼人像像真度的方法是利用 Faceware Technology 設計人像的面部表情。透過將人類的特徵及動作融入虛擬世界，用家使用元宇宙的體驗便能與現實無痕接軌。

NFTs Redefine Ownership in Music Industry

Proper application of blockchain technology is another key to keeping up the Metaverse's momentum. Copyright issues have long been prevalent in the music industry, so it is important to make sure the owners get the recognition that they worked hard for. Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) with distinctive identity rooted in blockchain technology can be used to set protocols, ensuring transparency by means of smart contracts. Because NFTs are one-of-a-kind and cannot be reproduced, they are great for storing artwork, films, and music, hence giving owners of the music the credits they deserve. The more times the songs are played and used, higher the license fees the creators should receive. Musicians can make and keep all of the profits thanks to NFTs. The artists, agents, attorneys, record labels etc. share the profits in traditional music sales. By creating an NFT and selling it on a blockchain based marketplace, the artists could now retain original copyright ownership and receive the majority of the sale proceeds.

According to Chau, in spite of the fact that NFTs may provide a seemingly promising means of ownership protection, there are some inherent privacy threats to consider. As a musician, before jumping on the new trend and creating NFTs for their own work, how the rights of the materials embedded should be ensured. Under most circumstances musicians who created the pieces do not have exclusive rights to copy and use their songs. For instance, lyrics and melody might be copyrighted independently.

Chau observed that transforming a concert into a digital collectible enables artists to further monetize their performance recordings by ensuring exclusivity. NFTs can be used as tickets to concerts, bringing more revenues to the artists and helping to finance the music business. NFTs cannot be reproduced, so holding on to the NFTs provides fans a value of memorabilia. Fans purchasing the NFTs might also get early access and unlock encrypted or time-gated content. In all, introducing NFTs is definitely something to spice up the live performance, promote fan engagement as well as boosting ticket sales. Artists worldwide are beginning to recognize the benefits of fusing music and NFTs. As Hong Kong artists and stakeholders try to restore the entertainment industry to its former glory and succeed in their careers. NFTs are emerging as a distinctive way to bring Hong Kong in line with the new international norm. 🎧

NFT 重新定義音樂界中的擁有權

善用區塊鏈技術是另一個推動元宇宙發展的方法。版權問題一直存在於音樂業界,所以確保創作者得到應有的認可尤其重要。每個非同質化代幣(NFT)在區塊鏈中都有著獨一無二的代碼以用作建立智能合約,從而保障其透明度。基於 NFTs 獨一無二、且不能被複製的特性,它們十分適合用作存放藝術品、電影、及音樂,也確保創作者能擁有其應有的肯定。歌曲被播放或使用的次數越高,創作者所受到的版權費就越高。在傳統的音樂產業中,藝人、中介公司、律師、唱片公司等都會與創作者分享利潤。但透過製造 NFT 及放在區塊鏈上的市場售賣,音樂創作者現在能夠保留其版權以及收取絕大部分利潤。

鄒先生指出,NFTs 雖看似可以提供可靠的版權保護,但它在本質上仍然有些私隱隱憂需要被考慮。音樂創作者在跟隨新趨勢創造自己的 NFT 之前,必需確保自己擁有其歌曲素材的版權。在很多情況下,音樂創作者並沒有專有權複製及使用自己的作品。舉例說,一首歌的歌詞及旋律可以是兩個獨立的版權。

鄒先生注意到,將演唱會片段轉化成數碼收藏品能確保前者的獨有性,使藝人賺取更多利潤。NFTs 可以用作演唱會門票,給予藝人更多收入,並為音樂業界導入更多資金。由於 NFTs 不能被複製,因此對粉絲而言,持有這些 NFTs 的價值就等於持有收藏品。購買 NFTs 的歌迷亦可以提前觀看和解鎖被加密或有時間限制的內容。總括而言,推出 NFT 能為觀眾帶來更有趣的體驗、加強歌迷與歌手之間的互動、以及提高演唱會門票的銷量。結合音樂及 NFT 的優勢開始被世界各地的藝人所關注,當香港的藝人和娛樂產業持份者盼望成功的事業、以至回復娛樂產業過往的光輝,NFT 正是一個與眾不同的方式使香港與國際接軌。🎧