

A Theory of the Musical Genre: The Three-Phase Cycle

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ABSTRACT

Musical genre is a form of categorization that groups musical entities, such as musical works, which share affinity criteria. However, the way we use the category and theorize about it depends on how we define the concept of musical genre. Current musicological theories propose genres to be *sets*, with properties defining their boundaries; or *cognitive categories* profiled through cognitive processes involving perception, memory, imagination and intuition; or *cultural units* that emerge through intersubjective negotiations among semiotic codes. The theory here explained claims that musical genre can simultaneously be a cognitive category, a cultural unit, and a taxonomical class; they work as phases of a cyclic dynamic that covers the entire concept of *genre*. Set theory can explain the properties of sets while cognitive categories need to be explained with cognitive theories such as prototypes and family resemblances. This study aims for a broader definition of genre that solves some of the inconsistencies of current genre theories.

I. INTRODUCTION

To talk about music is to talk of categories. Our way to communicate concepts about music makes use of categories that describe music or represent its features. Moreover, music itself becomes categories when we refer to what we hear. One of the most common categories used to represent music is the musical genre.

Genre theorists have defined *genre* in multiple ways. A classic definition by Swales (1990) says that: “a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes”. The musical genre is thus a category that groups musical entities or events, such as “musical works”, which share one or several criteria of social compatibility, contextual affinity and symbolic truth of aesthetic nature. Genre creates meaning in communication: it guides toward attitudes, conjectures and expectations around the cultural artefact or the musical fact as social phenomena.

However, there are different ways to look at categories. Cognitive scientists, such as Rosch (1978) and Lakoff (1987), distinguish between what they call “classical categories”, defined by the properties shared by all their members, and “prototype-based categories”, defined by cognitive models. The discussion on this topic has tend to focus on which model seems to be the right one. Applied to the musical genre, the question would be: Is the genre a classical category or a cognitive category? I claim that this discussion is misleading the real subject, because both types of categories operate at different levels. What we need to do, if we want to understand the full complexity of musical genre, is to investigate how musical categories operate within these levels.

II. COGNITIVE CATEGORY, TAXONOMIC CLASS, OR CULTUAL UNIT?

In scientific literature concerning categorization, there has been a tendency to treat the terms “category” and “class” as equal. Nevertheless, it is precisely these concepts that make the difference. Classes are groups that have close definitions. They work as sets and follow the logic of set theory. Within this logic, sets have necessary and sufficient conditions of membership; hence, it is either absolute or null: an element “is” or “is not” part of a set. However, Lofti Zadeh (1965) extended the set logic theory to include fuzzy sets: sets with degrees of membership. If musical categories are open concepts, they have no clear definitions. Their boundaries are fuzzy due to their nature as symbolic forms.

Classes are organized by means of taxonomies. Taxonomies are structured through a stable conceptual system that sets the rules for classification. For example, if an element has certain properties of membership, it is part of a set *X*; if another element has different properties of membership, then it is not part of set *X*, but of set *Y*. There can even be a *vertical organization* of levels of inclusiveness; this implies that an element of set *X* can also be part of a bigger set with a broader definition.

With the definition of classes and rules that govern the taxonomy, neither the classes nor the taxonomy are tied to a particular context. Classification, under this logic, can be pursued in any time, place, culture or any particular state. It is a question of pure logic, not of cognition (although the relationship between pure logic and cognition is a major topic in my doctoral dissertation). This is what differentiates classification from cognitive categorization.

By means of cognition, categorization does not work with closed definitions because grouping depend of the cognitive capacities, such as perception, memory, imagination and intuition. These groups do not work as sets and are not bound within set logic. Instead, they work through *family resemblances*, as Wittgenstein (1953) claims. Something is part of a category because it resembles another thing in some way, and it does not matter if other things are part of the category because they resemble in another way. Although these categories have fuzzy limits, these boundaries cannot be fully explained by fuzzy logic since the categories are achieved by means of cognition, with all the limitations implied by cognitive capacities and context. The best way to understand these categories is through prototype-effects, as explained by Rosch (1978).

According to Rosch’s theory, cognitive categories tend to become defined in terms of prototypical instances that contain

the most representative attributes of the category. Category membership is therefore a judgement according to the degree of typicality with respect to the prototype.

Now, which one of the category models suits the best for the concept of *musical genre*? The answer is both of them. A genre can be conceived as a taxonomic class or as a cognitive category. As classes, genres have close definitions according to the conceptual systems that structure the musical taxonomy under which they operate. Being sets, the “membership” of a musical event in a genre depends on the conceptual model that establishes definitions. As open concepts, genres have fuzzy boundaries that can be analyzed through fuzzy set theory. Moreover, genres can be modelled using artificial intelligence to create automatic classification systems, such as those achieved for *Music Information Retrieval*.

On the other hand, genres can also stand for cognitive categories. When someone categorizes a piece of music, neither the category nor the musical properties that lead the categorization process are taken for granted. The properties of the musical event depend on cognitive capacities, context (whether social, historical, or emotional) and signification. These variables can produce diverse categorizations on a same event, even contradictory among them.

The conceptual models we use to deal with musical experiences determine the categorization process using both musical competences and knowledge mediated through culture. Genre, as a cognitive category, is projected mainly in the music identification cognitive processes, which deal with perception, memory, imagination and intuition. These categories have graded membership and fuzzy borders. We can analyze the family resemblances that structure genres as prototype effects. The spectrum of possible categories include those that are part of musical taxonomies (the ones we could call “official” genres), and categories that are not part of shared taxonomies among musical communities, which originate from a subjective relationship with music. Genre theorists such as Miller (1984) call these categories *de facto* genres.

The decisions by which one categorizes something into some genre rely, firstly, on one’s experience and knowledge. Nevertheless, to work as a category they need to be socialized so people within a musical community can find agreements for the use of the genres. According to Fabbri (2006), musical genres are cultural units, which are types of musical events, regulated by semiotic codes that associate a plane of expression to a plane of content. Semiotic codes can be interpreted as socially accepted norms, although mostly tacit. These norms can only be relevant if they are conventionalized.

Lopez Cano (2006) follows this assertion by saying that the musical genre is the result of signification operations and both intersubjective and contextual negotiations. For a genre to be a social category, it needs to pass through this process of assimilation of conventions within a musical community.

The difference of cultural units with cognitive categories is that the former are formed as cognitive types while the later involve semiotic types that deal with intersubjective negotiations. Still they are context dependant and that is what differentiates them from taxonomic classes. However, accepting that genres can work as cultural units is not evidence that deny the category models of genres as cognitive categories and taxonomic classes.

III. CONCLUSION: THE THREE-PHASE CYCLE

Social conventions aim to create the conceptual stability that is necessary for taxonomy formations. Hence, social conventions are a necessary step to convert the intersubjective categorization process into a classification, relying then on an established taxonomy and not on volatile contexts or experiences. Furthermore, these taxonomic classes, into which genres are converted, are as well part of the knowledge used to keep categorizing music.

So finally it completes a cycle: when someone ‘thinks’ music, or uses a musical genre he starts a categorization process that involves his cognitive capacities and experiences. Within these are his knowledge and experiences with musical taxonomies, that is, genres as classes. When these resulting categories have been socialised, there is a negotiation process to accept the ones that work fine for most people (within the community) and reject the ones that do not get into agreement. The agreements are achieved by semantic codes that can furtherly be translated into conventions that define the genres. With definitions, genres become part of musical taxonomies that are used for further categorization processes and therefore the cycle continues.

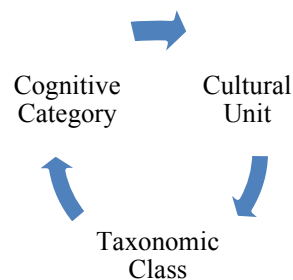


Figure 1. The three-phase cycle of genre

This cycle can also lead to transformation and reconfiguration of genres. As social conventions, genres “are born” and “die”, as Fabbri (2006) says; but as taxonomic classes, they are immanent, and changes over time are just attachments to their historical definitions.

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