

IMPLODING MUSICAL GENRE

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Locating a Modern phenomenon in Postmodern thought

By

CHRISTOPHER DAWES, B.MUS, FRCCO

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AUTHOR: Christopher Dawes, B.Mus. (Queen's University), F.R.C.C.O.

SUPERVISOR: Dr. William Renwick

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ABSTRACT

By the early 21st century, the term 'musical genre' has been repositioned in popular usage in comparison to its premodern/modern function. Instead of merely classifying pieces according to established formal structures in mainly western art and folk music, it has evolved through modernity and postmodernity into an enormous, complex and highly problematic system, phenomenon or construction seeking not just to fulfil that function, but also seeking stylistically to classify the popular and art music of every culture and era. Using the *Wikipedia* online listing of musical genres as one manifestation of the public usage of the term, one sees entire repertoires, traditions and their sub-categories such as jazz, motown, indie garage and mohabelo placed on non-hierarchical par with formal genres such as symphony, lament, ballad and strathespy.

This paper combines theoretical, researched, and anecdotal information around musical genre's nature and behaviour from a postmodern perspective. It examines the reimagining of musical genre which has characterised the postmodern age, and proposes models for understanding it based on the work of Theodor Adorno, Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard using three very different genres of church music as illustrations.

Finally, in addition to reporting on *Genre Implosion*, a weekly radio show which aired on CFMU 93.3FM throughout the duration of the project, it seeks to locate itself within the concepts of 20th century pragmatism underlying it, which make it less about positing 'truths' about musical genre than about encouraging its practical use and application in the flexible and multi-faceted forms inherent to postmodernity.

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To Marcia, Nate and Simon Dawes, for their humour, tolerance and sacrifices freely lain at the altar of this long-awaited return to academia, and for their support of a new engagement with ideas and issues that have intrigued and occupied the author's musical life. It is an engagement which, among a musical career's worth of engagements, will leave that musical life changed.

FOREWORD

Three biographical details gave genesis to this project, and may prove useful to the reader.

- 1) I'm naturally irritated by what I judge to be poor grammar and misused vocabulary. As the use of 'genre' to indicate a piece of music's style or history more than its formal or technical characteristics emerged really during my 20-year musical career, I have always noted the departure from the term's prior meaning. Yet, I have always been intrigued by the lexicographer's contention that meaning shifts in language are often indicative less of people being sloppy or poorly-taught than of broader societal changes. In studying postmodern thought I some detail during my M.A. degree the connection was an obvious one to make with the same period in history.
- 2) As a musician active in a wide range of what I now join the rest of the world in calling 'genres' and a keen listener to musicians talking about their work, I have seen genre's problems firsthand. Musicians often harbour some resentment against a system that either oversimplifies their art (as does, for example, "jazz", or even more, "classical music"), or seeks systematic categorization of something that inherently defies such. Listeners on the other hand, while sometimes sharing these objections to the genre system, often express frustration that they know so little about musical genres, and can recognize still less of them in the music they hear.
- 3) My work at Toronto's St. James' Cathedral over the 12-year period from 1999 to 2003 was fundamentally unlike that in any smaller church I know, in that as church to many diverse churches it had to accommodate the music of many ideologies, ethnicities and genres, often within a single service or other event. It was there that I became aware of the emotional and political power that is attached to musical genre.

My decision to 'retrieve' fallen modern-era "postmodern scholars" in studying musical genre is due perhaps foremost to their prominence in my theoretical courses here at Mac, and to the recent broader trend to revisit the many casualties of what was a tortured and convoluted 20th century of philosophical thought. But still more it speaks to my profound belief that the broader philosophical framework: the ideas and attitudes which shape societies at any given time also shape their products and creations. If the 20th century's dismissals of the ideas of Adorno,

McLuhan and Baudrillard have by the 21st century proved too hasty and facile, perhaps those highly individual minds have something to offer in considering 20th century society's creation, "musical genre", itself too often ignored as determining presence in the musical world.

Finally, my decision to position the paper's ideas in a pragmatic context, returning to the foundational premise of music as an organic commodity forced into an imperfect neo-scientific system, mirrors my belief that musical genre serves a very important and practical purpose, but that it must be addressed and understood practically in order to function well. In contrast to the earlier-era scholars whose ideas I've used to address musical genre, I draw principally here on thoughts and perspectives of a current figure, Richard Rorty. While I have sought a flexible, open and intellectual style for this paper in reflection of its postmodern ethos, I have also really sought to locate it somewhere in the real world.

George Bernard Shaw once famously remarked "If a thing is funny, search it carefully for hidden meaning." The power and problematic around musical genre has always struck me as funny, as have the historical dismissal of scholars whose work I, and increasingly the world that dismissed them, find intriguing and useful. My project, then, has ostensibly been an attempt to explore these questions, search them for hidden meaning, and point the way to a continuation of that process of inquiry. Stuart Sim, in his essay *Postmodernism and Philosophy*, characterises Rorty as, "in prototypically pragmatist fashion, less concerned with whether theories are true or false than with whether they are useful and interesting."¹ It is in this spirit that I have undertaken a form of implosion of the problematic system of musical genre; it is this spirit that I offer it in

¹ Sim, Stuart. "Postmodernism and Philosophy" in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Second Edition, ed. Stuart Sim. Oxford: Routledge, 2005. p.11

partial fulfilment of the requirements of my M.A., and it is in this spirit that I intend to continue the study.

While much potential exists for further academic work (developing further philosophical models for understanding genre, studying music industry data and dynamics for the indicators they must surely provide, and perhaps most interestingly, positioning historical and ethnomusicological studies in a more *über-genreal* than *micro-genreal* setting, to name but a few areas), I find myself drawn to the public media – print, Internet and public radio in particular. In this regard the Genre Implosion radio show has been an important ‘workshopping’ experience in thinking about bringing this work not to an academic audience, but to a general public one.

Some of the committee that reviewed the proposal stage of this project suggested strongly that I direct my work towards, or at least illustrate it using, a particular musical genre with which I am somewhat intimately acquainted, Church Music. Although the application of these ideas to musical genre is possible in some sense within any genre category (a fact I hope to imply here by periodic brief references to a wide range of musical genres, particularly in the opening chapter), running throughout this study is connective tissue in the form of the compound genre, or as I coin it, *über-genreal*, of Church Music – a choice which seems at once incidental in its finite nature, and appropriate for a body of scholarship which strives strenuously beyond the particular. While I initially resisted the committee’s well-intentioned advice, I now express my gratitude to those dissenting members, not only for their clear intention, which was to ensure that work which already promised to be somewhat broad and far-reaching resided in familiar territory for me, but now still more for the suggestion of a ‘genre’ which is perhaps as

diverse and far-reaching as anything called a 'genre' might be, spanning centuries and cultures and interacting with every nuance of history along the way. On a personal note, my acquiescence to this suggestion ultimately encouraged me to devote a significant amount of time and thought to a rather large corner of the musical world not just well-known, but very dear to me, and one arguably within which genre dynamics and politics play as significant a role as they do anywhere else in the 21st century musical world.

This paper's (and in my view, all criticism's) role is to intrigue and illuminate, rather than to coerce or convince.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	v
INTRODUCTION	1
MUSICAL GENRE AT THE START OF THE 21 st CENTURY	
Locating Musical Genre	11
The Great Genreal Paradigm Shift	13
Shifted, and Still Shaking.....	15
Church Music: A Case for Über-Genreal Status	25
MUSICAL GENRE AS ARTWORK	
Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969): Musician and Marxist	31
Adorno's Genre: A Continuum between the Universal and the Particular	34
Anglican Chant, Standardised Church Musical Genre	38
An Adornian Reading of Anglican Chant as 'Artwork'	42
MUSICAL GENRE AS MEDIUM	
Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980): Probing Media in Mid-Century.....	46
Extending Humanity: McLuhan and Media.....	48
Christian Country Music: Case Study of a Genreal Medium.....	53
A McLuhan Reading of Christian Country Music in Radio Space.....	59
Country Music in 2000: Roots and Revival	61
MUSICAL GENRE AS SIMULACRUM	
Jean Baudrillard (1929-): Economist of Signs	65
"The Mass", Simulation and Implosion	66
Musical Genre as Simulacrum.....	71
Contemporary Christian Music in Service and Simulation	74
POSTMODERNITY and MUSICAL GENRE	
Genre Implosion: A Radio Experiment on CFMU 93.3FM	85
Conclusions: Pragmatism and Postmodernity.....	91
APPENDIX: Genre Implosion on CFMU 93.3FM	
Playlists November 2005 – March 2006	99
Genre Implosion Listener Survey	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY	109

INTRODUCTION

“The Whole is the untrue.”
- *Theodor W. Adorno* -

“The simulacrum is never what hides the truth –
it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none.”
- *Jean Baudrillard* -

“What is truth? ‘Eet ees vhatever upsets zee applecart.’”
- *H. Marshall McLuhan* -

What is the truth about musical genre? Our postmodern times caution against universal and essentialised versions of truth, but it seems reasonable to base one version of truth on a certain consensus: musical genre is a useful tool, a powerful determinant and a problematic aspect of the musical world of our time.

A recent professional experience brought the power of genre home: the score I composed in 2005 to “Thirteen Hands” by Canadian playwright Carol Shields, a cultural study of sorts into the card game Bridge and the role it has played in North American, middle-class Caucasian women’s lives from 1922 to the present. Shields’ script specifically requests three songs to be composed, two of which (a Gilbert & Sullivan company number, *It’s not a Sin* and a gospel number, *Thirteen Hands*) specify a musical genre as part of the request.

The third song requested by Shields came with no genre specification although the presence throughout of sections marked ‘recitative’ suggested either an operatic treatment or

more likely a quintessentially 'music theatre' form. Two song genres having been so specifically chosen by the playwright seemed to point to the third being just as different again, so neither opera nor 'music theatre' seemed to work, with G & S already present. "That's what we're here for" appears in a scene where four 1950s-era women are seated at the bridge table playing and complaining about woes which range from humorous day-to-day irritations to the grippingly personal fear of aging, all the while encouraging each other to share in this way. Domestic forms of womanhood often meant little social contact, and husband-driven company moves often meant women had few long-term friendships: the bridge table, in Shields' thesis, filled a social void and enhanced women's agency to think and communicate as individuals. As we began to see the bridge table as an entrée into a new and unfamiliar sorority and personal intimacy, a solution to our general dilemma began to materialise.

Why not a *blues number*, not so much for the reason that the characters were 'singing the blues' about aspects of their lives, nor for the predictable 12-bar pattern that provided time and structure for the 'recitative' sections to be delivered, nor for the fact that a cast of fourth-year twenty-something women would know and 'get into' the style. All of these things were factors, but the decision was finally made for a dramaturgical vision for the number which emerged: that we could stage it in such a way that these white, middle-class, middle-century, North American women could begin singing to a very straight and anonymous beat on piano and bass in a singing/speaking style with which they would be familiar, and over the next six minutes be drawn together, as the song added instruments, swung rhythm and general spirit, into the exotic, swinging, and irreverent territory of a musical genre they would likely never have heard let

alone known, as they entered a meaningful communion just as strange to their own lives. The song became a highlight for the cast and of the production. Had the Director and I chosen to set the number in a more conventional way, would the number have worked? Perhaps: but there can no doubt that the various encodings of the blues genre for both the performers and the audiences, and the 'genreal journey' we took the characters on to echo their journey into community, were key to its success.

Musical Genre at the beginning of the 21st century is an arbitrarily-formed, highly problematic and little-understood system, phenomenon and/or construction of the musical world – but it has undeniable connotative power which often exceeds that of the very musical compositions it seeks to help us locate in sound, in history, and in a host of other intended and unintended properties. Notwithstanding that individual pieces can still be hugely popular and historically important, it is musical genres, not musical compositions, which hold sway over musical production, musical taste, musical politics and musical signification as we know them.

In this project I examine the current form of the concept of 'musical genre'. In particular I apply the concepts of three of the 20th century's most variously revered and maligned cultural and media theorists, Theodor Adorno, Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard, drawing upon their original texts and the critique of their work. The choice of these three figures stems from three factors: 1) each has a well-known and highly original critique of a 20th century western society shaped by the emergence and domination of mass, electronic media; 2) the philosophical framework each provides, which in their various ways permit studying musical genre in new and interesting ways, and 3) the utopian nature of each theorist's sociological project, which in their

unique ways combines harsh criticism of a society formed by and yet straining against Modernity with suggestions of hope and ideas which at least advocate for, and in some ways predict reprieve and recovery from the problematic represented by western society we built in, or inherited from, the 20th century.

At several points in this project I make a somewhat ambiguous reference to Musical Genre as a “system, phenomenon or construction.” Where only one of this trinity is mentioned it is normally ‘system’, since this best describes the way musical genre functions in musical life; but the other two aspects of genre – a *phenomenon* which ‘emerges’ from musical life, and a *construction* which is more actively created by artists, industry players and listeners – are indispensable to understanding genre formation and production as they impact the musical world. I use the word ‘trinity’ advisedly, and less as any sort of reference to the Christian subject matter treated throughout this project than to the theological nature of the Holy Trinity, which posits Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three distinct aspects of a singular God. It is not so important, in my view, to determine *which* aspect of musical genre is the most or least ‘true’, or to speculate about where one applies more than or less than another in a given situation: it *is*, however, important that all three models be borne in mind in considering musical genre.

Some of the committee that reviewed the proposal stage of this project suggested strongly that I direct my work towards, or at least illustrate it using, a particular musical genre with which I am somewhat intimately acquainted, ‘Church Music’. Although the application of these ideas to musical genre is possible in some sense within any genre category (a fact I hope to imply here by periodic brief references to a wide range of musical genres, particularly in the

opening chapter), running throughout this study is connective tissue in the form of the compound genre, or as I coin it, *über-genreal*, of Church Music – a choice which seems at once incidental in its finite nature, and appropriate for a body of scholarship which strives strenuously beyond the particular. While I initially resisted the committee's well-intentioned advice, I now express my gratitude to those dissenting members, not only for their clear intention, which was to ensure that work which already promised to be somewhat broad and far-reaching resided in familiar territory for me, but now still more for the suggestion of a 'genre' which is perhaps as diverse and far-reaching as anything called a 'genre' might be, spanning centuries and cultures and interacting with every nuance of history along the way. On a personal note, my acquiescence to this suggestion ultimately encouraged me to devote a significant amount of time and thought to a rather large corner of the musical world not just well-known, but very dear to me, and one arguably within which genre dynamics and politics play as significant a role as they do anywhere else in the 21st century musical world.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the system, phenomenon or construction of musical genre, and the problematic it presents to the hierarchically-contained pieces of music over which it seems to rule in the musical world today. More particularly it is a study of our current (early 21st century) concept of musical genre – an analysis of how it evolved quickly from a simple, arbitrary nominological/typological formation concerned primarily with musical form (and secondarily with instrumentation and usage of pieces) within western classical music into a much larger system more concerned with stylistic, historical and aesthetic content, addressing *entire repertoires* of pieces, and encompassing a musical world containing hundreds of popular, ethno-

cultural, blended and composite categories (and crucially, methodologies of categorisation) which formerly had gone unconsidered.

Each of Chapters 2, 3, and 4 addresses the concept of musical genre as it might have been viewed by a significant critical figure in what is now considered postmodern thought (although only one of them, Baudrillard, has lived to see the term 'postmodern' in wide use). I will state here, and restate again later, that in each case musical genre is an application of the critic's theories he never made himself, and so at best this work must be considered informed (and hopefully, supported) conjecture. Risky though this enterprise may be, all of the theories in question emerged sufficiently ahead of their time, and have been sufficiently influential, to have inspired many such conjectural (and in the case of McLuhan and Adorno, posthumous) applications to phenomena which simply had not yet manifest at the time of the critic's initial work². In each of these chapters for the benefit of readers less familiar with the critic in question I provide a brief introduction to his life, formative influences, and corpus of work.

In Chapter 2 I have sought to locate musical genre within the realm of the work of art, which for Adorno lay upon a dialectical continuum between the universal and the particular, of form and content. Rather than addressing the musical genres upon which Adorno himself commented in his notorious critique of popular culture, and a capitalist-derived commoditised model for cultural production, I have chosen to turn some of his ideas elsewhere, onto a church musical sub-genre he may well never have heard. Church Music is replete with sub-genres which

² As examples: Adorno is of great interest to theorists of "Disneyfication" and "McDonaldisation"; the recent resurgence of interest in McLuhan has by no coincidence paralleled the rise of the Internet he predicted but never saw; Baudrillard's own applications of his idea of simulacra to Disneyland, Egyptian mummies and Watergate have been joined by others' as diverse as computer analysis of art and accountability in Australian school funding.

exhibit many of the properties of simplicity, general sameness, and even a form of fetishism, all of which Adorno felt engendered a 'regression of listening', and thus found subversive of art, and destructive of society. For precisely the reason of circumventing the standard late 20th century ghettoising of Adorno's thought as being founded in personal bias against capitalism, Americana and non-canonical musics, I have applied his thoughts where none of those biases can exist.

In Chapter 3, which traces its origins back to a paper I presented at York University in May 2005 entitled "Country Music in Radio Space", I consider musical genre as a form of technological innovation, and thus, a medium under Marshall McLuhan's understanding of media as "Extensions of Man". Using principally the formative theories in *Understanding Media* that launched McLuhan's international celebrity in the late 1960s and the *Laws of Media* published posthumously in 1988, I will track one church musical genre's behaviour as both object and subject at both ends of a 20th century wracked with sociological and technological change. The outcome of this part of the study is indicative of the problem McLuhan represented to the scholars of Modernity, and also provides a possible explanation for the resurgence of interest in his ideas that has followed.

In Chapter 4 I apply "simulacrist", "implosionist" and self-styled "theoretical terrorist"³ Jean Baudrillard's doctrine of simulacra and simulation, and his notion of the implosion of meaning, to musical genre in our time. Following a brief account of the theories to be considered with reference to music in society (a reference Baudrillard himself rarely made), I will follow his example by applying his theoretical concepts to an area of the real postmodern world he has left

³ Baudrillard, Jean. "On Nihilism" in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. p. 163

unaddressed in his often severe and yet poignant critique. I attempt to read musical genre in our time as an instance of *simulation*, locating it within the orders of *simulacra* and the *phases of image*, and as a current manifestation of the *implosion of meaning* he claims is underway and unavoidable in postmodern society. Here, the church musical genre case is an appropriative, and less-than-successful transplant of a highly successful genre motivated by the simulacrum it represented to the appropriators.

The concluding chapter first reflects, and invites the reader to reflect upon the experience of developing, pitching, producing, hosting and receiving feedback on a radio show, *Genre Implosion*, which ran weekly on CFMU 93.3FM in Hamilton since November 2005. The weekly process of researching and producing a 30-minute ‘implosion’ of genre by rather self-consciously presenting a huge variety of music suggested by such broadly connecting ideas as ‘introductions’, ‘the low female voice’, ‘musical pictures’, ‘the Trojan horse’, ‘winter’, etc., as well as an online “genre survey” from listeners, returned anecdotal material which is less empirically demonstrative than interesting and useful. Finally, it draws together the study’s components under the mantle of pragmatism which motivated it and underlies it.

This Introduction began with epigraphic quotations from Adorno, Baudrillard and McLuhan about truth: the notion of truth, and questions of its nature and existence, was for them and remains a major preoccupation for all other postmodern thinkers dating back at least as far as Nietzsche, but this is not to say that any of them claimed a monopoly on truth about the concepts they studied. Nor, crucially, is it to imply that this paper is a quest for truth in a philosophical construct intended to be true, but turned false, or at least somewhat misleading.

Rather, it is encouragement for the study of musical genre to follow in the footsteps of other areas of musical scholarship into a realm illuminated by the leading philosophical thinkers of a problematic century in which its current form was cast. Interestingly all three of the thinkers addressed here have suffered dismissal and attack for insights and ideas that have proven “true,” or at least useful, by the passage of time and the course taken by that problematic century. That the 20th century could bring about the rise, downfall and retrieval of such concepts as McLuhan’s “Extensions of Man” and Adorno’s “Regression of Listening” is a clue to modernity’s tortured legacy, felt in many ways longer in music into the paradigms post-modernity than in other areas of scholarship. It also suggests that true understanding of many modern constructs like the system of musical genre classification may have to wait still further beyond the turn of the 21st century than we find ourselves today.

Stuart Sim sums up the ethos and method behind this project:

Postmodern philosophy in general sees no need for outright confrontation with systems of power, being more concerned to demonstrate how such systems may be made to implode.⁴

Implosion in this sense (we will see Baudrillard’s different but related version in some detail in Chapter 4), is related to another postmodern invention, Derrida’s *deconstruction*, in that it seeks not to attack arguments, but rather asks them (with an astonishing rate of success) to bring about their own downfall. My agenda towards musical genre is not a hostile one: indeed it is an interesting subject, a useful tool, and frankly despite its limitations and problematic nature

⁴ Sim, Stuart. “Postmodernism and Philosophy” in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Second Edition, ed. Stuart Sim. Oxford: Routledge, 2005. p.10

is so firmly entrenched in musical life as to be virtually unassailable in its present form. Rather, my agenda is to help show some of the cracks brought on by rapid change through the late 20th century, to allow inaccurate conceptions of it to implode, and to offer some models for understanding whatever is left.