

Classical music as genre: Hierarchies of value within freelance classical musicians' discourses

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Anna Bull** 

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Abstract

In music studies, genre theory has primarily been used to study popular music rather than classical music. This article demonstrates how genre theory can be applied to studying classical music production in order to understand how its value is negotiated and reproduced. Drawing on data from interviews with early-career female classical musicians in London, it explores discourses of classical music as a genre in order to understand how genre shapes working lives. We identify three themes within the data: first, genre hierarchies contribute to the (re-)production of divisions of labour, in ways that reaffirm gendered hierarchies. Second, many research participants actively portrayed themselves as being interested in different musical genres, both as listeners and as performers, but identified other classical musicians as having pejorative attitudes towards non-classical genres or practices such as playing in a band. Third, genre hierarchies were (re-)produced in institutional settings, in musicians' working practices and in social interactions. Overall, analysing classical music as a genre through examining the perspectives of freelance musicians shows that subgenres within classical music, as well as classical music itself, are understood relationally to other genres in a hierarchy of value that reaffirms existing inequalities in the cultural labour market.

Keywords

Classical music, cultural labour market, genre, inequalities, value

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This article analyses how classical music is understood and experienced as a genre by professional classical musicians today. Drawing on interview data from 18 early-career female classical musicians working in London, the article focuses on the intersections of genre and musical labour. Analysing the accounts of musicians attempting to negotiate genre categories within the labour market enables us to examine how genre categorisation plays out in professional musicians' lives, and how considerations of genre intersect with inequalities and institutions.

In classical music, genre has previously been used to study groupings of types of musical work (sonata, symphony, etc) (Brackett, 2016: 33), but classical music as a category in itself, in common with other 'high culture' genres, has had less analysis. Therefore, we draw here on theorisations of genre used in popular music studies, situating these in dialogue with cultural studies literature. The main contribution of this article is to bring this body of genre theory into dialogue with discussions of classical music practice, while also contributing to a growing international literature on classical music and inequalities. Our data show that genre theory is helpful to discuss how value is reproduced and allocated to particular groups within classical music practice, and to illuminate its contemporary social and aesthetic conventions, practices and norms, as well as how its value is constructed relationally to other genres.

This analytical move is important for two reasons: first, in order to push forward debates on making visible classical music's value, relationally to other genres, in order to understand why it still remains privileged in cultural policy and in education (Bull, 2019; Bull and Scharff, 2017). It is also important in order to further foster, theoretically and empirically, dialogue between music studies and sociology. As Georgina Born (2010) has described, genre theory enables music scholars to draw together the work they already do – on canons, institutions and aesthetics, for example – with sociological work on taste, inequalities, production and consumption. This approach is beneficial for sociologists as well as musicologists, enabling socio-musical studies of 'social aesthetics' (Born et al., 2017) to better understand the aesthetic questions that are at stake, and for musicologists to draw on explanatory research from sociology and to further interrogate and theorise classical music and its cultures of practice as an object of analysis.

We, therefore, draw on Born's work, as earlier, along with Brackett's (2016) understanding of genres as relational, in order to explore what classical music is constructed *in relation to*, generically, and to what extent do musicians understand different genres, or levels of genre within classical music, as constituting hierarchical relationships. Most importantly, examining musicians' discourses on genre and exploring how concerns and constraints around genre shape their working lives makes visible what genre categorisations in classical music do socially. The article, therefore, asks how genre contributes towards structuring the working lives of these young women attempting to make a living in classical music.

Within cultural studies literature, there has been more attention to genre as a reception than a production category (Bruun, 2010). However, some authors have drawn links between gender and genre in cultural production, linking gender inequalities not only to structural and systemic inequalities but also to the internal, gendered qualities of the genre's texts and production norms. For example, Ana Alacovska (2017) outlines how women crime writers in Denmark are obliged to write within the masculinised norms of

the genre in order to succeed. Similarly, in her study of women travel writers, Alacovska (2015) argues that ‘travel writing is not merely reflective of gender inequalities, but it constitutes them’ (p. 40) due to the ways in which norms of propriety and safety for women against men’s intrepid adventuring into the dangerous and unknown are reinscribed. Such gendered structures within texts and their production can be found in other cultural production contexts; Anne O’Brien (2019) describes how women working in the screen industry in Ireland are ‘ghettoised’, as one of her interviewees described it, into feminised genres or, within journalism, into ‘soft’ topics that do not allow routes to power or prestige in the ways ‘masculine’ topics do. These studies demonstrate the ways in which ‘genres, by virtue of their formal *gendered* conventions of plot, character and fictional universe, provide the structuring ideology for the (re)production of gender inequalities in media work’ (Alacovska, 2017: 379).

However, these studies of gender and genre focus on media production that is primarily discursive and representational. Classical music – particularly orchestral music which, as we describe below, is seen as its quintessence – is non-discursive. Indeed, as Georgina Born (2011) argues, musical sound is non-representational, thereby generating ‘a profusion of extra-musical connotations’ that are ‘naturalized and projected into the musical sound object, yet they tend to be experienced as deriving from it’ (p. 377). Music, therefore, requires specific analytical tools that take into account these aesthetic affordances. In order to do this, we have drawn on popular music studies literature to theorise classical music as a genre.

In the article, we first outline theoretical and empirical literature on music and genre to explore how classical music can be theorised as a genre, arguing with Frith (1996: 75) that judgements around genre are judgements of value. After a brief overview of the methods used to gather and analyse the interview data, we outline three themes within the data: first, how genre hierarchies contribute to the (re-)production of divisions of labour in ways that may be gendered, racialised and classed; second, the ways in which participants identified other classical musicians, but not themselves, as having pejorative attitudes towards non-classical genres or practices; and third, how genre hierarchies were (re-)produced in institutional settings, in musicians’ working practices and in social interactions. We conclude by arguing that analysing classical music as a genre, as well as detailing subgenres within classical music, makes visible how it is constructed relationally to other genres in a hierarchy of value that influences inequalities in the cultural labour market.

Classical music and genre

Popular music studies have since the 1980s used theorisations of genre to understand the relationship between the social and the aesthetic by studying the circulation of common ‘orientations, expectations and conventions’ (Neale, 1980: 19) between producers, audiences, industry and texts. This approach draws together analysis of the conditions of production of cultural objects, the aesthetic properties of the objects themselves and their reception (Negus, 1999; Toynbee, 2000). Here, we focus on two aspects of this theorisation that can help explain the enduring unequal patterns of production and consumption of classical music (Scharff, 2017) in order to illuminate how genre theory can be

employed to study classical music: how identities (and inequalities) are formed or mobilised through genre; and the role of institutions in shaping genre.

Genre judgements by fans or audiences, by musicians and by industry intermediaries form part of the 'materialisation of identities' through music (Born, 2011). Frith (1996: 90) discusses this idea as 'genre identities': an identity association with a particular genre of music that also states what kind of person you are, or to what kind of imagined community you would like to belong (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000). Genres – and through genres, identities – are constructed relationally, within an unstable system of musical signifiers (Brackett, 2016: 7; Fabbri, 1982: 60). However, such a focus on identity or subject formation through music has been much more present in studies of popular genres than in classical music as contemporary practice (although see Bull, 2019: chapter 8 and Stirling, 2019).

In addition, literature on popular music and genre reveals the role of the music industry and musical institutions in making and reinforcing genre boundaries and conventions. This aspect of genre theory has been extended to classical music's subgenre of avant-garde music by Georgina Born. Born discusses genre within a wider explanatory theory of cultural production, drawing on ethnographies within two institutions that produce high culture: the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music (IRCAM) and the BBC. She examines how institutional conditions affect the cultural objects that are made (Born, 2010: 189), outlining how high culture institutions inform the emergence or development of genres (Born, 2010: 192). These institutional arrangements may shape political and aesthetic effects, a particularly important question to ask in relation to classical music given its disproportionate level of state funding compared to other genres (Bull and Scharff, 2017).

Despite a lack of attention to classical music as a genre, various genre conventions of classical music can be identified within the existing literature. In music education, Lucy Green (2003: 16), drawing on research with music teachers, has identified ideological values which are ascribed to classical music: universality, autonomy from social concerns, complexity and originality; these values are used to judge other genres of music as less valuable. Bull (2019) identifies social and aesthetic conventions of classical music including a pedagogy of long-term investment and 'getting it right', emotional depth, eschewing amplification and formal modes of social organisation of music making. However, the relative lack of attention to classical music's institutions and social genre conventions is symptomatic of classical music's self-construction as 'autonomous' from the social (Born, 2010; Bull, 2019).

Indeed, the denial of classical music as a genre category is another aspect of this disavowal of the social and is arguably one of its genre conventions (see Drott, 2013: 7). Against this approach, Drott (2013) draws on Actor Network Theory to argue for theorising genre 'not so much a group as a grouping, the gerund ending calling attention to the fact that it is something that must be continually produced and reproduced' (p. 10). This attention to the making and re-making of genre by actors is helpful. However, we suggest that it is also necessary to draw attention to the ways in which social structures and institutions enable or constrain the reproduction of genre groupings, as well as the ways in which genres are constituted relationally as more or less valuable. Most importantly for

this article, such genre hierarchies can also reinforce hierarchies of socially valued identities. For example, musicologist Marcia Citron argues that the classical music canon is gendered in its division of hierarchies of musical forms; the symphony and similar large-scale musical forms are associated with masculinity and public-ness, only accessible as a genre to male composers, while less prestigious genres suitable to private, domestic performance were the only ones available to women composers (Citron, 1990; on gender and genre see also Alacovska, 2015, 2017; O'Brien, 2019). Or, as Bourdieu (1996) describes them, genre hierarchies may uphold class distinctions, for example, between the 'restricted' and 'autonomous' poles of the field of cultural production. These discussions show that the 'relationship between categories of music and categories of people' that David Brackett (2016: n.p.) explores in popular music, and how these intersect with wider social inequalities, must be foregrounded in any genre analysis. This article, therefore, takes as its central problematic Frith's argument that judgements around genre are judgements of value (Frith, 1996: 75), with value being interpreted as both *social* and *aesthetic* value.

In this article, drawing on the literature earlier, we propose examining classical music as a genre in itself. Brackett's interpretation of Fabbri's theorisation of levels of genre is helpful here (Brackett, 2016: 8; Fabbri, 1982). On the highest level of this taxonomy sit four meta-categories: popular music, jazz, 'traditional music' and 'Western art music'. On the next level of this 'nested hierarchy' (Drott, 2013: 11), each of these categories branches out into sub-categories within the genre. In classical music, musicological analyses have tended to focus on musical genre categories such as symphony, concerto, sonata, examining formal and stylistic conventions (Brackett, 2016: 4) foregrounding the musical text or focusing on the historical formation of classical music as a genre (see, for example, DiMaggio, 1986). A different approach to understanding genre in classical music practice is through studies of the industry or 'scene' such as Gilmore's work on concert production in New York in the 1980s, which segments the classical music scene into three areas: repertory concert music, academic composition and the avant-garde (Gilmore, 1987: 210). Similarly, The Audience Agency in the United Kingdom, analysing data on consumption of live classical music in the United Kingdom, formulates 12 categories including 'popular classical', baroque, youth music and orchestral (Bradley, 2017). We suggest that such an attention to classical music and its subgenres, by foregrounding the social practice of classical music rather than the musical text, can help to make classical music visible as a genre, and in doing so, can illuminate how its value is produced and/or contested.

This approach is in contrast to the terminology of music studies which has, until recently, designated classical music as 'western art music'. However, instead of offering an a priori definition of 'classical music', we instead use empirical data to explore how an understanding of the genre – including its different levels or subgenres – emerges within discourse. This follows Bull's (2019) argument that 'the way in which "classical music" is defined is important – and contested – because the boundaries drawn around it work to store value in this space' (p. xvii). In this article, we, therefore, examine musical categorisation through a social rather than musicological lens in order to explore the production of value hierarchies between and within genres.

Research methods

In early 2019, Christina Scharff conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with female, early-career classical musicians exploring their musical history, training and education, and experiences of working in the classical music profession. In this article, we draw on data from these interviews in relation to questions about whether the musicians played any other genres in addition to classical, how they would define classical music as a genre, and how, if at all, classical music was different from other genres.

Scharff spoke to instrumentalists, singers, conductors and composers, who mostly worked on a freelance basis. The research participants self-identified as ‘classical musicians’ and played across a range of classical genres, including orchestral and theatre, as well as branching out into popular music at times. Reflecting the demographic make-up of the classical music profession in the United Kingdom, specifically in relation to the lack of diversity in terms of race and class (Scharff, 2017), three research participants were mixed race (Black-African/White; Pakistani/White and East Asian/White), one East Asian and 14 White. One research participant described her background as lower middle-class, three as working-class and 14 as middle-class. The research participants were aged between 23 and 31, with the majority being in their late 20s. Due to the research aims of the wider study, all interviewees were women, and this allowed us to open up gendered aspects of the ways in which genre hierarchies contribute to the (re-) production of divisions of labour.

All research participants were based in London, where the interviews were conducted. Conversations lasted between 60 minutes and 80 minutes and the research participants gave their informed consent. The interviewer assured them that their anonymity would be protected, pseudonyms would be used and that any information that may identify them to others would be removed from publications. It is for this reason that we do not provide detailed demographic information when introducing the research participants. Given the under-representation of women as well as Black and minority ethnic musicians in the classical music industry, certain research participants could be identified easily. Each interview was recorded, subsequently transcribed and we used thematic analysis to interpret the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The perspectives presented within this article encompass only musicians from one genre – classical music – rather than enabling a comparison of perspectives from musicians across different genres, which might reveal a variety of practices of valuing. In addition, the perspectives of those within other positions in the classical music industry, such as critics, audiences, funders, institutional leaders or educators might provide contrasting accounts to those presented below. Nevertheless, we argue that these perspectives are important precisely because of interviewees’ relative lack of power to shape or change these genre hierarchies.

What is classical music? On genre, genre hierarchies and labour practices

The majority of research participants struggled to respond to the question of how to define classical music as a genre. Rowena’s immediate response to the question was ‘Oh

my god', while Suzanne repeated the question 'How would you define classical music?', adding 'What a question'. Of course, not all research participants struggled to give an answer. Sally, for example, stated,

Um, I would explain it [laughs]. I mean to someone who knew nothing about it, probably, probably music that is written for orchestral instruments. I'd probably try and explain to them what an orchestra was and maybe talk about people they might have heard of, like Mozart and Beethoven. But ultimately, it does come back to, you know, the old, white composers, men composers, from Mozart, Beethoven, all those kinds of people. I think that's . . . When people think of classical music, I think that's what they think of.

Sally draws attention to associations of classical music with particular identities and positionings, namely 'white composers, men composers', although the laughter at the beginning of her statement expresses some uncertainty or hesitation.

Felicity reflected on the difficulty of how to define classical music:

It's weird that it's hard to define. Because, um, other, even much sort of smaller genres – because classical music is quite a wide genre, find themselves easier to define. And I think part of that is to do with audience because, for example, like punk rock defines itself by like sort of who – it's an identity thing. And that identity is, also has edges of this is who we are and that's who . . . That is who we're not. Whereas classical music claims to be for everyone, in which case it's a lot harder to find the edges of what it is and what it is not. But there are also sort of . . . I suppose part of it is just instruments and notation and concert practice, but even outside of that concert practice, it's. You know, I guess it's a thing built on tradition and, and therefore we know what it is because it's [laughter] it's part of our tradition.

Felicity's statement on the links between particular genres and identities resonates with Frith's (1996) notion of 'genre identities'. By stating that classical music 'claims to be for everyone', Felicity evokes a universalising discourse: the idea that classical music's value is recognisable cross-culturally and it is a universal language (see Green, 2003). Indeed, philosopher Roger Scruton (2007) has made this claim, arguing that it 'is a symbol of Western civilization itself' (p. 90). As Felicity illustrates, classical music's universalised status is 'part of our tradition'. She, thus, comes back to issues of identity and portrays herself as belonging to this particular genre. The use of 'our' in this statement evokes a shared but un-defined identity – perhaps, linked to the 'traditional western' description in the previous quote. This is elaborated by her statement that opposed to 'smaller genres', such as 'punk rock', 'it is a lot harder to find the edges of what classical music is or is not'. Indeed, Felicity's statement may be read as a 'materialisation of identity' through music (Born, 2011), but she also reflects on how classical music claims to be above or outside of identity associations, confirming arguments that classical music is understood as being universal or outside the social.

The association of classical music as – paradoxically – outside of any particular social identity but also somehow linked with White, male, western identities, suggests that classical music is not only universalised, but that it occupies a privileged status. Indeed, numerous research participants gave accounts of hierarchies between genres, where classical music was often placed at the top. Crucially, hierarchies also existed within

classical music. The following statements illustrate the hierarchies between musical genres and within classical music:

Particularly people who have got positions in orchestras, see themselves, well see classical music as like, the ultimate. And that everything else is just working up towards that. And particularly, yeah, I know some people have been like ‘Oh, you’re working in theatre? Great, yeah, good’. They give you that sort of look like, ‘Oh, so you’ve not really like, made it as an orchestral musician’. (Sally)

Portraying orchestral musicians’ attitude towards classical music as ‘the ultimate’, Sally draws attention to classical music being positioned at the top of the hierarchy of musical genres. At the same time, she points to levels of genre within classical music, arguing that orchestral musicians look down upon those who play for theatre. Her statement also illustrates how genre hierarchies map onto differently valued labour practices, with theatre work being degraded. Jenny made a similar observation, noting that, playing in West End shows is positioned as a less prestigious form of work than a ‘classical concert’ even while it is often better paid.

The hierarchy of sub-categories within the genre of classical music (e.g. orchestral playing vs theatre work), as well as hierarchies between different genres (e.g. classical music vs music theatre), map onto a hierarchy of achievement identified in previous research (HEFCE, 2002), which found that solo performing ranked highest, followed by ensemble musician, orchestral player, opera chorus, music therapist, teacher and administrator. The links between hierarchies of genres, hierarchies of sub-categories within a particular genre and differently valued labour practices came to the fore in Ruby’s statement. Reflecting on her experiences of working in pop, and trying to make sense of fellow musicians’ dismissive responses, Ruby makes the following observation:

There’s this hierarchy which is, you leave Music College and if you are amazing you are a soloist and you’ve definitely won life. And if you’re quite good, you know, really meaning exceptional, you might get into an orchestra or you might be auditioning for orchestras or having a trial, and that’s . . . So that’s going quite well.

If you’re not doing very well, I guess you’re freelancing, but who knows what that means, lots of question marks. So, really, you’re probably teaching, which is like ‘Oh, shame, good for you’. And then if you’re doing really badly you’re, like, not even working in music, in which case, like, well [. . .]. So, yeah, pop, well, sits in this, like, weird, funny freelance bracket which no-one really knows what it is.

As Ruby’s statement illustrates, different genres (in this case, classical music and pop) are associated with specific labour practices, where pop is allocated to the ‘freelance bracket’ and classical music is most readily associated with orchestral or solo work. Ruby’s discussion of labour practices in the context of hierarchies of genre is particularly relevant when recalling that certain labour practices map onto gendered divisions of labour. Ruby, for example, refers to teaching as another facet of freelancing. In the United Kingdom, 71 percent of music teachers were female in 2014 and women have dominated music teaching in Britain throughout the 20th century (Green,

1997). Teaching, however, is often considered a lesser form of music making. This comes to the fore in Ruby's statement but has also been evidenced in other research (Bennett, 2008; HEFCE, 2002). Existing hierarchies between musical genres that place classical music at the top, as well as hierarchies within a genre (Citron, 1990), thus map onto differently valued labour practices, which – in the case of music teaching – are gendered.

Genre, value and identity

The different values attributed to particular labour practices, and the ways in which they come to the fore in discussions about genre, shed light on Frith's (1996) observation that judgements around genre are judgements of value. Jessica voiced this link when commenting on a recent experience:

We had a film composer coming in, and she was like, 'I just think when people haven't studied counterpoint, their music is just worse'.

Counterpoint is a term that describes 'the combination of simultaneously sounding musical lines according to a system of rules' (Sachs and Dahlhaus, 2020: n.p.) of which Bach's compositions are seen to be exemplary. The composer's statement thus devalues other musical forms as 'worse', entailing a value judgement. Indeed, several research participants commented – albeit often critically – on existing hierarchies of genre and value, where classical music and specific sub-categories were placed at the top. According to Kimberly, 'often, there is a little bit of, you know, if it's not Mozart, it's not worthwhile [laughs], unfortunately'. When I asked her where these views came from, she suggested, 'maybe from the older generation that I think, you know, people in their 50s, 60s and 70s who are still performing and, you know, grew up playing before musical theatre even existed, really'. In Kimberly's statement, a contrast is set up between Mozart as the ultimate representation of classical music and other genres, such as musical theatre, as 'not worthwhile'.

While Kimberly attributed the characterisation of Mozart as the most valuable music to other, older musicians, Suzanne's statement demonstrates that she had partly taken on board views that rank classical music more highly than other musical genres:

Live classical music is the most exciting, for me the most exciting thing. Like when you, when you hear other genres of music, so much of it is synthesized or electronic these days for cost purposes and ease.

Suzanne depicts live classical music as the 'most exciting' genre. Later in the interview, she associated classical music with 'high quality music making':

Annoyingly, I think a lot of people just think 'Oh, what's classical music? Oh, it's like, it's Mozart' or 'Oh, it's, it's stuff that like posh, rich people listen to'. And it's like, no that is so not the case. Well yeah, I want it to not be the case. So, I suppose my perception of it is about collaboration and yeah. Sharing high quality music making with as many people as possible.

Similar to Kimberly, Suzanne makes reference to Mozart and although she is critical of portrayals of classical music as ‘the stuff that like posh, rich people listen to’, her reference to ‘high quality’ music making, particularly when read in conjunction with her previous statement about other, synthesised or electronic genres, nevertheless evokes a hierarchy where classical music ranks highly. In this context, it is noteworthy that Suzanne reiterates associations between classical music and ‘posh, rich people’, thus bringing class into her discussion of genre, value and classical music. Similar to other statements that associated classical music with Whiteness, masculinity and western contexts, Suzanne references a link between classical music and being upper class, thus shedding further light on the association of specific identities with particular musical genres. We argue that the association of classical music with Whiteness, masculinity, western culture and being upper class is not separate from, but instead linked to the positioning of classical music at the top of the hierarchy of musical genres.

The different values attached to musical genres, and the ways in which differently valued genres are associated with particular identities, also came to the fore in depictions of classical music as ‘serious’, and other, musical genres, such as pop, as more fun (see also Bull, 2019; Bull and Scharff, 2017). To recall, Isabelle described classical music as ‘less fun in some ways’ (section 1), resonating with Kimberly’s statement:

My playing is half classical, half musical theatre. But I enjoy both and [laughs]. There’s something so great about learning a sonata for three months, and, you know, getting everything totally how you want it. But also, there’s something really wonderful about picking up a song and sight-reading it and it’s just, you know, quite fun and not too serious.

As this statement, among others in the sample, illustrates, non-classical genres are associated with ‘fun’, while classical music is portrayed as ‘serious’.

Equally important, non-classical genres were also seen as ‘easier’. Molly felt that other musicians had ‘some attitude’ towards the kind of freelance work she was engaged in. Having stated that the ‘air of Music College is “you must go into classical”’, Molly argued that

there definitely is some, some attitude. You know, like, ‘Oh, she plays with a band, that means that she’s playing really easy music’. And, you know that means, you know, she’s just, sort of accompanying someone who is, you know the big deal and, you’re just, sort of, in the background playing.

Molly’s statement illustrates the link between portrayals of non-classical genres as ‘fun’ on one hand, and negative value judgements of these types of music as ‘easy’ on the other hand. Classical music is implied to be more difficult than playing in a band, supporting Lucy Green’s (2003) findings that ‘complexity’ is one of the qualities valued within classical music. Again, distinctions between different genres of music go hand-in-hand with value judgements, even if the research participants are themselves critical of such views.

Interestingly, Molly indicated that these value judgements have a gendered dimension. Discussing electric string playing, she stated,

There's a bit of a, I guess a snobbery, a little bit? Of like, the electric, the sort of, corporate electric thing versus, you know, serious classical things. And often if, if you do a lot of the electric stuff, then you can often get pigeon-holed into that. Which is something that I guess guys wouldn't have, as much as girls would have? You know, if a guy had an electric violin, it would be quite a different story, to if a girl has an electric violin.

Again, associations between particular musical genres, value judgements and identities come to the fore in Molly's statement, indicating that genres which are different from 'serious, classical things' are devalued and raising the question of whether these genres are more readily associated with femininity and other minoritised identities. In relation to gender, genre hierarchies may contribute to and (re-)produce existing inequalities, especially if we consider that female musicians struggle to be taken seriously as artists (Scharff, 2017) due to long-standing associations between masculinity and artistry in western mythology (Bain, 2004).

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that some research participants felt the need to hide or play down their involvement in other musical genres. Octavia performed a lot of background music at prestigious events, playing current hits. However, she told me, 'I don't think you can find a video of me playing them online. So, it was a conscious, it's been a conscious decision'. Octavia attributed her decision not to advertise her pop work to dismissive attitudes towards pop music in the classical music world. Similarly, Rowena shared her fears of presenting herself as a singer-songwriter (rather than an opera singer): 'If I came to someone and I said, "I'm a singer-songwriter", my own anxiety may have been assuming that they were, like turning their nose up'. And Harriet told me she was sure that 'some of my colleagues would be reluctant to broadcast themselves as being, um, multi-genre musicians, for fear of that becoming, them being taken less seriously as classical musicians'. Indeed, Born (1995 291–294) found that musicians at prestigious new music institution IRCAM similarly concealed their pop music practices. These genre hierarchies and value judgements pose a challenge to musicians who play across different genres, especially if they are female and already in a more marginalised position. Genre hierarchies, thus, have social and political effects.

As we have emphasised already, many research participants took a critical stance on existing genre hierarchies and actively portrayed themselves as being interested in different musical genres, both as listeners and performers. Isabelle, for example, told me, 'If I'm like listening on Spotify, I would like rarely ever play classical music actually. I love pop music. Anything that's in the charts now. And musicals'. Likewise, Suzanne told me that she would have done a 'bit of like jazz and big band singing' and that she still did 'quite a lot of classical cabaret stuff'. As these statements illustrate, most research participants did not support the genre hierarchies they identified and criticised the ways in which these hierarchies devalued particular forms of work they were engaged in. How, then, can we explain the persistence of existing genre hierarchies? The next section seeks to provide some answers to this question.

Persisting genre hierarchies: institutionalisation, working practices and social interaction

Many research participants argued that institutions, and particularly educational settings, (re-)produce distinctions and hierarchies between genres. Kimberly, who had described

her playing as ‘half classical, half musical theatre’ found that she got ‘pigeon-holed’ into musical theatre when she was at Music College:

When I started at [anonymised], I mentioned to one of my teachers there that I really like musical theatre. And then she kind of put me up for lots of projects that were related to that, but not the classical stuff as well, which I also, you know, that’s what I was there to study and I was interested in that as well.

Equally, Sally told me that she had played jazz and classical until she started Music College:

You audition for the jazz or the classical course. And yeah, you pretty much stick to those two things. So there was a bit of a time where there was a jazz trumpet player, I was giving him lessons and he was giving me lessons. But we sort of, like, you know, ultimately you just become so busy with what you’re doing that it becomes really hard to continue those sorts of things.

Jessica also felt that her university did not encourage students to veer into different genres. Talking about her Head of Department, she stated that he ‘doesn’t really get [. . .] different genres’. As these statements illustrate, the research participants felt that they were not encouraged to play across different genres when pursuing their undergraduate degrees, and instead, experienced higher education institutions as upholding distinctions between genres.

Some research participants also argued that music colleges (re-)produced existing hierarchies between genres, with classical music ranking highest. Juniper told me, ‘My teachers are brilliant, but [. . .] they always joke about this sort of theatre stuff being kind of what the drunks do and stuff, which really makes me cross’. Similarly, Molly felt that ‘everyone is slightly pushed into having to think that they are gonna, they need to play sonatas and solo repertoire all the time when they leave Music College, you know’. This, according to Molly, mapped onto perceptions of successful musicianship:

There’s definitely, when you’re at Music College, there’s very separate ideas of what a successful musician is. So, you know, it’s like, you learn all this repertoire and you do all these auditions, like mock orchestral auditions. And it’s all very, very heavily classical.

Molly concluded by stating that ‘the professors at [anonymised] or the, the sort of, air of Music College is, you must go into classical’. Molly’s and Juniper’s experiences correspond to the hierarchies discussed in section 1, where solo and orchestral work rank highly, and other forms of musical work are devalued because they do not correspond to prevalent ideas of what a ‘successful musician is’.

In addition to higher education institutions, working practices also contribute to the maintenance of genre distinctions and hierarchies, as Bruun (2010) has also described in relation to television production. Similar to other cultural industries, classical musicians heavily rely on networking to find work (Scharff, 2017), and this reliance on networking could make it harder to play across genres. Talking about the genres of classical music and jazz, Emma stated,

And I think again because, because they are slightly different genres, they have different pools that once you start doing well in one, you'll keep doing well in that. And again, it's kind of contacts that you know, yeah who you play with. So, I think it's just, it's not necessarily restriction. It's more just if you put a bit of time in and kind of play with these people a bit, then you'll get asked back and the same for classical. So, if you end up doing mostly classical, you'll keep ending up doing mostly classical.

In this way, distinctions between genres are not only (re-)produced in educational and institutional settings but are also related to network-based labour practices.

Participation in genre networks or talent pools was facilitated or inhibited by the skills required to play in different genres. Singer Rowena described how singing opera, unamplified, is 'a totally different way of using your voice' to singing amplified for genres such as jazz. Rowena was able to do both but observed that 'I know that singers are discouraged from, from doing both when they're at music college'. Similar to Bull's (2019: 84) findings, Emma stated that 'I'm absolutely rubbish at improvising [. . .] It terrifies me'. Equally, Octavia talked about doing session work and the different rhythmic and ensemble skills required. In this way, different skills are required for different genres, making it harder to move between them, but this skill development was shaped through participants' training within tertiary education institutions, where, as noted earlier, it was not easy to move between genres.

Separations between genres also seem to be upheld in musicians' individual practice, and the ways in which they interact with each other. To recall, Octavia did not promote her pop playing because of dismissive attitudes towards pop music in the classical music world, and she gave the example of prestigious London concert venue Wigmore Hall. This example points to the role of classical music institutions in drawing boundaries between genres, but also points to the ways in which classical musicians negotiate genre hierarchies in their professional practice.

Finally, genre distinctions also seem to be (re-)produced in musicians' interactions. Ruby had just come back from a world tour with a pop musician and wondered how her former peers from Music College would respond to her news:

And they are like 'Oh, who's that with?' And when I say, 'Oh, it's a singer, you know, she's a pop singer', because no-one's . . . Most people my age haven't really heard of her, at the moment. So it's kind of like 'Oh, so it's pop, it's pop?' As if people don't know what that means, they can't understand what that means, which I find interesting . . . There's definitely a sort of 'Oh, I was worried for a second you were doing really well'.

Ruby, in fact, was about to meet some colleagues of hers with whom she had gone to Music College. She expected that she would be asked, 'What are you doing?', explaining that the meaning of this question was 'should I be respecting you or am I doing better than you, or what's going on?' Ruby's reflections shed light on what are perhaps common interactions among cultural workers, where social occasions provide an opportunity to judge one's professional success in a field – such as freelancing – which is very informal with few easily visible markers of success. However, Ruby's statement also provides insight into the ways in which genre hierarchies are (re-)produced in interactions between musicians. According to Ruby, the reference to 'pop' music will put her peers at ease; while she went

on a world tour, they do not have to be worried that she is ‘doing really well’. In line with our preceding analysis, Ruby presumes that pop will be regarded as less prestigious than classical music; indeed, she observes that many of her peers do not even seem to know what pop means, adding to a sense that classical music is valued more highly. As Ruby’s reflections suggest, genre hierarchies are not only (re-)produced in institutional settings and in musicians’ working practices, but also seem to be upheld in social interaction. Arguably, these processes explain the persistence of genre hierarchies despite the research participants’ critique of the positioning of (particular forms of) classical music at the top.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how genre theory can be applied to a high cultural form – classical music – to make visible its identity associations and conventions, as well as the ways in which they are institutionalised. It has applied to classical music two explanatory ideas from genre theory in popular music studies: how identities are materialised through genres, and the role of institutions in reproducing these. Overall, it has outlined how distinctions and hierarchies between genres and subgenres reinforce existing inequalities within classical music production. As such, we have mobilised the analytical notion of genre to enhance our understanding of why hierarchies of value, in this case relating to gender, persist in classical music practice.

As our analysis in the first section demonstrated, the genre of classical music was associated both with a universal identity but also with particular identities (such as whiteness, middle-classness and masculinity) and frequently, though by no means uncritically, positioned at the top of genre hierarchies. Associations between particular musical genres, value judgements and identities also came to the fore in the second analytical section, indicating that genres which are different from ‘serious, classical music’ are devalued and raising the question of whether these genres are more readily associated with femininity. Interestingly, and as we demonstrated, many research participants discussed existing genre hierarchies critically, which led us to explore why genre hierarchies persist. As the third and final analytical section has shown, genre hierarchies are (re-)produced in institutional settings, particularly higher education, musicians’ often network-based working practices and interaction. These social and institutional processes illuminate why genre hierarchies persist, even in a context where musicians challenge them.

Within the hierarchy of subgenres of classical music, being a soloist was perceived as the most prestigious, followed by being an orchestral musician, the careers that participants perceived music colleges (and sometimes university music degrees) to value. Notably, this hierarchy of value also maps onto the gendered hierarchy of sub-genres within classical music identified by Citron (1990; 1993). As she outlines, the ‘internal divisions’ of the classical music canon ‘establish[es] hierarchies that are linked with gender: maleness with the large, the non-functional and the intellectual, which are valued; femaleness with the small, the functional, and the private, which are devalued’ (Citron 1993; 122). Some participants did play contemporary classical music and others were involved in projects that extended or shifted the boundaries of classical music, or stated that they would like to do so. This suggests that should the mechanisms by which

genre hierarchies are upheld be loosened, these musicians may embrace the opportunity to open up the aesthetic of classical music, which Bull (2019) has argued has the potential to contribute to tackling inequalities.

One way in which this hierarchy maps onto the conventions of classical music practice is in valuing non-amplified genres more highly than genres that involve amplification, electronic instruments or synthesised sounds. In addition, our previous findings (Bull and Scharff, 2017) that classical music is perceived as ‘serious’ rather than ‘fun’ were strongly reinforced in these data. These conventions (along with others identified by Bull, 2019) in their circulation between text, industry or institutions, and audiences, help maintain a hierarchy of genres where classical music is more highly valued than other genres.

Notably, all participants had some involvement in genres other than classical (see also Bennett, 2008), including theatre or musical theatre work, pop, singer-songwriting, big band music, jazz and session work. However, these other genres were all perceived as being less valued than classical, even if they paid more. As noted earlier, these genre hierarchies were seen to be produced and reinforced by institutions, most notably music colleges. Indeed, this hierarchy of values resulted in musicians having a more limited education and poorer training for a musical career. As interviewees were mostly in their late 20s and so would have graduated from music colleges within the last 5–10 years, this suggests that music higher education has continued to uphold the genre hierarchy whereby classical music is valued over other genres.

To conclude, we have argued that analysing classical music as a genre, as well as detailing subgenres within classical music, makes visible how genre classifications reinforce existing inequalities. Apart from adding to our understanding of the persistence of inequalities, such an approach allows us to challenge still-prevalent discourses of classical music’s ‘autonomy’ from the social and enables a relational study of classical music by demonstrating how it is constructed relationally to other genres, demonstrating how genre theory can be used to understand classical music’s cultures, practices and conventions.

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