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**Literary Theory, Constructing Musical Genre, and Communicating Musical
Meaning in the Early Modern Period**

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Paper

Literary genre theory has often been invoked outside of the realm of literary criticism. Rick Altman has made ample usage of literary theories in his exploration of genre in film (1999).¹ In the field of musicology, literary genre theory provides a lens for examining popular music and culture in David Brackett's *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*² and informs the culturally driven approach to popular music genres at work in essays and books by Jennifer Lena and Richard Peterson.³ In this paper, however, I propose the use of literary genre theory to elucidate the pliable conception of musical genre in the seventeenth century, specifically in music produced and performed at the archiepiscopal court of Salzburg.

Salzburg provides a compelling case study for genre in the early modern period since composers at the court including Georg Muffat, Heinrich Biber, and Andreas Hofer were notoriously flexible in their usage of genre labels (or lack thereof). The city and surrounding region were governed by a single ruler who was both a high ecclesiastic and of princely blood, representative of the dual power characteristic of the absolutist melding of the church and the sovereign state. Therefore, these composers were obliged to provide music for both sacred and secular domains, suitable to represent the station of the Prince Archbishop as both a religious and political authority. Instrumental music, lacking an explicit connection to text, provided a particularly versatile medium for

¹ Rick Altman, *Genre/Film* (Palgrave, 1999).

² David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (University of California Press, 2016).

³ Jennifer Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music*. Princeton University Press, 2012), and Jennifer Lena and Richard A. Peterson. "Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres." *American Sociological Review* 73, no. 5 (2008): 697–718.

performance in both consecrated and civil venues.⁴ The following study of seventeenth-century genre provides a deeper understanding of the compositional processes and contexts in Salzburg in the seventeenth century, echoing Rachel Mundy's argument in her 2014 *JAMS* article that studying taxonomies of musical style can aid in the process of classifying and defining human cultures.⁵

Following a brief introduction to theoretical and practical applications of musical genre in the seventeenth century, the flexible nature of genre described by literary theorists such as John Frow, Jacques Derrida, Anne Freadman, and Mikhail Bakhtin will provide a lens for considering the function of genre in the early modern era, especially in Salzburg where the repertoire of Heinrich Biber and his contemporaries reveals how composers readily traversed genre boundaries in instrumental music of the period.

The earliest literary genre theory can be traced back to Aristotle's categories of epic, lyric, and dramatic compositions. An early modern theory of musical types, however, begins to emerge in the well-known debate between Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Artusi, in which Monteverdi justifies his use of chromaticism as characteristic of a particular musical type, that of *seconda prattica*. In addition to composers, authors such as Michael Praetorius and Athanasius Kircher published musical encyclopedias describing particular styles and categories of musical compositions.

In the musical taxonomy of Praetorius in his *Syntagma musicum* of 1619, texted works are arranged according to topic (serious or humorous).⁶ In the *Musurgia universalis* of 1650,⁷ on the other hand, Kircher divides works in the *stylus ecclesiasticus* [sacred style] into two groups, one including works bound to a *cantus firmus*, and the other of freely-composed works. Topic plays a central role in defining Kircher's *stylus madrigalescus*, which sets texts of "fables and histories of virtues and vice." Textual meter and form define Kircher's *stylus melismaticus*, which "belongs to verse and metrical

⁴ Instrumental music was paramount to Prince Archbishop Maximilian Gandolph von Kuenburg who reigned from 1668 to 1687 and who hired on two notable composers of instrumental music in the 1670s: Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber and Georg Muffat. The ensemble sonatas of these two composers extant in print and manuscript embrace the versatility of the genre in both name and style.

⁵ Rachel Mundy, "Evolutionary Categories and Musical Style from Adler to America," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67 (2014): 735–761.

⁶ Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum III*, trans. Jeffery Kite-Powell (Oxford University Press, 2004), 17. The humorous texts are then divided into three sections determined by the form of the text, whether the text is directly linked to a poetic form, is in a free form, or is "patched together."

⁷ Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia universalis sive ars magna consoni et dissoni* (2 vols, Romae: Ex Typographia Haeredum Francisci Corbelletti, 1650); facsimile edition in one vol., ed. Ulf Scharlau (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1970).

compositions.”⁸

Form is also crucial for categorizing untexted works. Praetorius divides freely composed “preludes” from those composed in specific dance forms. Social functions or performance practices facilitate the further subdivision of dance categories. Kircher similarly takes performance context, form, and style into account when classifying instrumental music. Kircher’s *stylus hypochematicus* includes courtly music such as dances and homophonic ensemble canzonas.⁹ The social dances are ordered according to meter and dancers’ movements.¹⁰ His *stylus phantasticus* is characterized by a particular virtuosity while the *stylus symphonicus* belongs “to all sorts of instruments.”¹¹ On the other hand, Marco Scacchi uses performance context as the basis for his three main categories: ecclesiastical, chamber, and theatrical music, that are then further subdivided based on instrumentation/voicing his musical taxonomy offered in a letter to a fellow composer, Christopher Werner, around 1648.¹²

The flexibility in naming and the variety of musical categories provided by these theorists reflects the innovative spirit of the time, when pieces were not bound by specific genre labels. The seventeenth-century sonata provides an ideal example. While the term “sonata” defines a multi-movement work made up of a particular order of movement types in the later classical period, the sonata as a genre in the seventeenth century was a free-form composition that could be in any tempo or style, in one movement or made up of multiple movements.

In fact, in collections of instrument ensemble music by Salzburg composers Georg Muffat and Heinrich Biber, the term sonata appears in two guises, both as the title of a

⁸ These passages were originally translated by Charles Brewer in *The Instrumental Music of Schmelzter, Biber, Muffat and their Contemporaries* (Ashgate, 2011), 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹ Melanie Wald, *Welterkenntnis aus Musik: Athanasius Kirchers Musurgia universalis und die Universalwissenschaft im 17. Jahrhundert* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2006), 153.

¹² This letter was Scacchi’s response to a collection of pieces Christoph Werner had sent him, the *Praemissa musicalia* (Königsberg, 1646) [RISM W 803]. Werner had written to Scacchi, requesting feedback on his compositions. In his dissertation, George Boyd notes that the original copy of Scacchi’s letter was recovered in 1955 and is now residing in the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek in Hamburg. George Boyd, “The Scacchi/Siefert Controversy with Translations of Marco Scacchi, *Cribrum musicum* and Paul Siefert, *Anticribatio musica*” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1996), 20. This sources has been discussed at length by Walter Werbeck in “Heinrich Schütz und der Streit zwischen Marco Scacchi und Paul Siefert,” *Schütz-Jahrbuch* 17 (1995), 64. Prior to being lost during World War II, the letter was published in its original Latin by Erich Katz in *Die musikalischen Stilbegriffe des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Charlottenburg: W. Flegel, 1926), 83–89.

multi-section work itself *and* as the title of an individual movement, often an introductory section, in a larger set of movements, groupings that are sometimes titled as “pars” or “partia”. In two of Biber’s printed collections, the *Sonatae tam aris quam aulis* (Salzburg, 1676) and the *Fidicinium sacro-profanum* (Salzburg, 1682) Biber uses the term “sonata” to title multi-movement works with sections set apart by tempo designations. On the other hand, in Biber’s *Harmonia artificiosa* (Salzburg, 1696) and his *Mensa Sonora* (Salzburg, 1680), the term is used to describe opening sections of larger works. In Georg Muffat’s *Armonico tributo* (Salzburg, 1682), he uses the term in both guises simultaneously.

This rather confusing usage of terminology is further complicated by the diverse array of musical styles and textures at work in each piece. Sections of learned contrapuntal imitation rub shoulders with the homophonic textures of a sacred chorale, the sounds of trumpet fanfares, moments of dramatic monody, and dance-like melodies, evading definition according to any of the theoretical taxonomies described above.

A rather simple absence of genre ascription likewise plagues one of seventeenth-century Salzburg’s arguably most famous collections of solo violin music, Heinrich Biber’s Rosary “Sonatas”. In this collection, which survives only in fair manuscript copy, each piece is titled simply with a woodcut of one of the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary, although individual sections of the pieces are labeled as “sonata”, “intrada”, etc. While these works are often referred to as sonatas, the free form of each piece has led scholars such as Charles Brewer to argue that these pieces should not be called sonatas, but should rather be considered as “partitas”, a name more suited to the heterogeneous character of the music.¹³

This sort of genre confusion occurs in vocal music as well. For example, the title page of Andreas Hofer’s printed collection of sacred Latin settings for voices and instruments, *Ver sacrum seu flores* (Salzburg 1677), lacks any sort of genre name. Hofer describes the music as “for the Offertory” on the title page, but neglects to set any of the standard Offertory texts prescribed by Salzburg’s liturgy. What do we call these pieces? offertories? motets? sacred concertos? The variety of texts that are stitched together (and types of texts, for that matter: poetry, prose, strophic hymns, freely composed prayers) in the pieces of this collection along with the variety of musical styles embraced by each of the eighteen pieces in the collection invite questions about what exactly these pieces *are*.

While many musicologists have worked to create definitions for specific genres of instrumental music in the period, specifically the *sonata da chiesa* and the *sonata da camera*,¹⁴ Paul Whitehead has acknowledged the futility of this practice, describing the

¹³ Charles Brewer, *Instrumental Music*, 303–304.

¹⁴ Brewer posits that the presence of organ or harpsichord for the continuo part may indicate a churchly or courtly function, respectively, for the piece. See Brewer, *Instrumental Music*, 1. According to Eric Chafe, a pious affect created by a polychoral texture or wind instruments may betray a sacred function. See Eric Chafe, *The Church*

preoccupation with genre designations in seventeenth-century instrumental music as an “attempt to divide the spectrum of genres to correspond to a possible division into secular and sacred functions a classification that dismisses the flexibility inherent in the genre itself.”¹⁵ He, however, neglects to provide any sort of “way out” of this conundrum. Here I will argue against the practice of trying to coerce these pieces into a specific genre or discussing them based on how well or how poorly they align with particular genres and thus passing judgement on a piece, perhaps even subconsciously. Here I will suggest, rather, that literary genre theory provides a language and mode for understanding and discussing these “tricky” pieces from the 17th century.

Modern literary genre theory has roots in the early nineteenth century, when authors such Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller first called Aristotle’s tri-partite division (mentioned above) into question and made a conscious move away from the purely descriptive account of individual genres to pursue a more “natural” and philosophical theory of genre.¹⁶ This movement culminates in twentieth-century literary theorist Jacques Derrida’s (1930–2004) outright rejection of “pure” forms of genres. Derrida’s post-structuralist performance-based formulation of genre dictates that “a text does not belong to any single genre. Every text participates in one or several genres. There is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never

Music of Heinrich Biber (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), 184. William Newman defines the style of the church sonata as embodying a “weightier more serious character, as the result of a richer, sometimes a more polyphonic texture, and of more developed forms.” On the other hand, Newman suggests that the presence of labeled dance movements may indicate a courtly sonata. See William Newman, *The Sonata in the Baroque Era*. 1963. Rev. ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton Co., 1983), 34. Gregory Barnett notes that in the Bolognese sources, a sonata that has labeled dance movements, even if it is lacking a specific label, would not have been considered suitable for performance in church, and would therefore be considered a *sonata da camera*. See Gregory Barnett, *Bolognese Instrumental Music, 1660–1710* (Ashgate, 2008), 172.

¹⁵ Paul Whitehead, “Austro-German Printed Sources of Instrumental Ensemble Music, 1630–1700,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1996), 101.

¹⁶ David Duff, “Introduction,” in *Modern Genre Theory* (London: Longman, 2000), 3. Gérard Genette has shown that the genre theory distinguishing between three modes of literary representation: epic, lyric, and drama, which came under fire in the Romantic period, was a conflation of the work of Aristotle and Plato. While Aristotle defined literary types according to mode and object of representation, Plato named three modes of literary representation: narrative, dramatic, and mixed. Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 60–72. This resonates with one of the main problems of musical genres as described by David Brackett: defining musical genre seems straightforward until we start actually considering the “basis of similarity” with which to define a genre. The closer we compare two pieces of the same “genre”, the more differences tend to appear, therefore subverting the genre definition of either piece. See Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 3.

amounts to belonging.”¹⁷

Anne Freadman, who teaches comparative literature at the University of Melbourne, likewise rejects the idea of a concrete, taxonomic construction of genre. She articulates two assumptions about genre that are naturally false because of the absence of a singular relationship between a text and its genre: (1) “that a text is ‘in’ a genre, i.e. that it is primarily, or solely describable in terms of the rules of one genre” and (2) “that a genre is ‘in’ a text, i.e., that the features of a text will correspond (exactly) to the rules of that genre.”¹⁸

So if texts do not “belong” to particular genres or do not have to align specifically to a generic type: what is the point of considering genre at all? In the words of John Frow, a modern genre theorist and English professor at the University of Sydney, “Texts do not belong to genre, rather they *use* genre.”¹⁹ Peter Seitel, a folklorist at the Smithsonian, explains this idea more fully, describing genre as “an interpretive tool, a set of concepts and methods that provides insight into the kinds of meaning articulated by a work that accounts for the aesthetic experience it produces.”²⁰ While genres must exist in theory as established discrete and recognizable conventions, genres can be put to work within a piece of any type. Frow explains theoretical and conventional genres as “simple forms [that] tend to have specific and definite meanings or functions.”²¹ These simple forms are then “extended, expanded, aggregated, parodied, or in some other way transformed in the more complex forms” when the generic convention is called upon in a particular work.²²

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), a theorist of a slightly earlier generation, makes a similar distinction between simple (primary) and complex (secondary) genre designations, describing a nesting relationship between the two and between literary language and ordinary, pragmatic language:

Secondary (complex) speech genres – novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary, and so forth – arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on. During the process of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communication. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to actual reality

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida. “The Law of Genre,” trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 65.

¹⁸ Anne Freadman. “Untitled: (On Genre),” *Cultural Studies* 2 (1988): 73.

¹⁹ Frow, *Genre* (Routledge, 1).

²⁰ Seitel, “Theorizing Genres,” 275.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

and to the real utterances of others.²³

This relational construction of genre provides a framework for discussing generic ramifications in instrumental repertoire of the seventeenth-century.

Heinrich Biber's manuscript ensemble sonata, *Sonata a 6, die pauern kirchfarth genandt* ("The Peasant's Procession/Pilgrimage to Church) was composed in Salzburg in 1673. While we can only guess as to the original performance context of this piece, the date of its composition aligns roughly with the 1674 dedication of the pilgrimage church of Maria Plain located just outside of the city of Salzburg the following year, an event that corresponds nicely with the programmatic contents of the Sonata. Regardless of the piece's uncertain performance history, the programmatic nature of both its subtitle and the representational meaning created by generic references in its music, is striking.

Although the sonata does not specifically contain separate movements, four sections of the piece are clearly distinguished by stark contrasts in texture and style. Biber opens the sonata with a short concerted movement for string choir and continuo ([Example 1](#)).²⁴ In the second section, which bears the text, "die Pauern Kirchfart" in the violin parts, Biber sets a tune from a well-known, Austrian Marian song, *Mutter Gottes auswählt*, in a somber, antiphonal, homophonic style, not unlike the antiphonal chanting of prayers. The violins play in parallel octaves, slowly and deliberately and the entire section is repeated ([Example 2](#)).²⁵

This solemn litany-like setting of the Lied is followed by an *adagio* in which Biber utilizes a written-out *tremulo* effect in the violin parts, aurally reminiscent of the *organo*

²³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 62. Clare Bokulich described the idea of "generic nesting" in fifteenth-century music in a 2014 paper on generic interconnection in Josquin's Elevation motet, *Tu solus, qui facis mirabilia*, which cites a rondeau (song) by Ockeghem, *D'ung aultre amer*, and Josquin's *Missa Tu solus*, which incorporates both the motet and the song. Bokulich unravels the generic relationships between the rondeau, motet, and Mass, and argues that cross-generic nesting illustrates how musical genres can be built around one another. Clare Bokulich, "A song within a motet within a Mass: Josquin's *Tu Solis* and Generic Nesting in Fifteenth-Century Music," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 6–9, 2014.

²⁴ Recording by Reinhard Goebel and Musica Antiqua Köln. Available on iTunes or for free via [Spotify](#).

²⁵ Heinrich Biber, *Sonata a 6 "Die pauern-Kirchfarth genandt,"* ed. Jiří Sehnal, *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich*, 151 (Vienna: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1997), 1-8. According to Walther Lipphardt, the tune *Mutter Gottes ausserkorn* was composed around 1631 by Pater David Gregor Corner and first published in his *Gross Catolisch Gesangbuch* in Nuremberg in 1625. See Walther Lipphardt, *Marienlied* (Freiburg: Christophorus Verlag, 1954), 51.

tremolante (tremulant organ stop).²⁶ According to Gregory Barnett, the use of this particular organ stop was often affiliated with the *durezza e ligature* musical topic, which involved soft and grave music at a slow tempo suitable for devotion on the mystery of the Eucharist.²⁷ Biber's use of this *tremolante* texture, along with a slow tempo and dissonant suspensions in this adagio section corresponds to characteristics of the music that commonly accompanied the mystical part of the mass in which the bread and wine were transformed into the body and blood of Christ and presented to the congregation during the Elevation of the Mass. See [Example 3](#). Biber shifts gears a final time to conclude the sonata with a rustic-sounding dance ([Example 4](#)).

In this case, Biber's sonata "digests" elements of the sacred concerto, litany, elevation, and dance genres. Trying to categorize this piece according to traditionally descriptive musical genres is problematic since it neither confirms nor denies its sense of being a sonata. However, considering this piece in light of literary genre theory's flexible formation and use of genre and the more nuanced relationship between complex and simple genres, Biber's sonata makes more sense. The complex genre of the sonata has absorbed a variety of other genres, some with sacred, vocal roots. Moreover, Biber uses references to these other genres to create and communicate dramatic and representational meaning in his instrumental piece.

Biber's famous Rosary Sonatas, or "Partitas," rather, also incorporate a variety of other genres. While the opening section of the tenth piece in the collection, that prefaced by an engraving of Christ's resurrection, bears the "sonata" label, the opening section is improvisatory and rhapsodic, sounding more like a prelude or a fantasia. The second section is labeled not with a genre or style but with the title of the hymn tune that provides the melodic material for the section, *Surrexit Christus Hodie*, a hymn for the feast of the resurrection. Here the style shifts abruptly to match that of a traditional hymn setting: homophonic writing between the continuo and violin parts. The traditionally strophic quality of the genre of a hymn is echoed in the theme and variations structure of this section. The final section, indicated by *adagio*, resembles a quiet and contemplative postlude. As in the ensemble sonata described above, Biber's solo "sonata" integrates elements of both vocal and instrumental genres, a characteristic that befuddles a strict genre categorization but is readily accommodated by literary theory's flexible notion of genre.

Both of these examples reveal the potential pitfalls of focusing on genre labels and simply contemplating how well or how poorly a piece might align with a specific genre category, especially in instrumental music of the seventeenth century. Considering how a piece activates references to multiple genres, however, allows for a deeper understanding of both the work's generic implications and the musical meaning woven into the fabric of the composition. In fact, one could posit that the prevalence of references to specific

²⁶ Eric Chafe, *The Church Music of Heinrich Biber* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Press, 1987), 13.

²⁷Barnett, *Bolognese Instrumental Music*, 206.

sacred, vocal genres in instrumental music composed in Salzburg in the seventeenth century reflects the court's absolutist amalgam of sacred and secular power.

Studying how composers and theorists thought about genre, rather than focusing on labeling and defining specific historical genres as we encounter them, informs our understanding of human cultures. This reflects Rachel Mundy's methodology in her recent article on approaches to musical style in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries mentioned at the outset of this talk. Mundy points to the role of categorization in developing modes of thought and describes the capacity of taxonomy of musical style. She writes that "by asking what it means to identify, teach, and hear musical style, we can engage more sensitively with music's power to classify human cultures."²⁸ In other words, historicizing our approach to genre by studying how composers of a particular period conceived of musical genres, rather than simply working to define their works on our generic terms, can provide insight into a compositional culture. To do this Mundy recommends studying how musical categories are created by a series of complex choices that "shape musical knowledge and its definition of difference."²⁹ Applying literary genre theory to instrumental music of the seventeenth century creates a space for genres such as the sonata, a nebulous genre and an ideal venue for experimentation and genre blending, and facilitates an exploration of these pieces while avoiding any generic constraints, allowing the seventeenth-century sonata's free form and flexible function to create its own particular "definition of difference."

²⁸ Mundy, "Evolutionary Categories and Musical Style," 761.

²⁹ *Ibid.*