

**CONTEMPORARY MUSIC AND THE RHETORIC OF GENRE:
SOME NEANDERTHAL PERSPECTIVES**

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IN ALBERTA, CANADA, the right wing of journalism was resolutely held for many years by a magazine entitled *Alberta Report*. Until its demise in 2003, *Alberta Report* was owned, edited and published by Ted Byfield, and later by his son, Link, both of whom are unabashedly right-wing, Christian fundamentalists. Similarly, the magazine's biases were, among others, Christian and evangelical, anti-abortionist, and homophobic. In Canada, and more specifically in Alberta, *Alberta Report* was variously regarded with attitudes ranging from admiration to amusement; outspoken support to outright hostility --or simply bemusement -- depending upon one's political persuasion, sexual orientation, conservative or liberal smugness, or geographic location.

Some years ago, when I was a faculty member at the University of Calgary, I was intrigued by a picture on the front of an issue of *Alberta Report* of a beast-like man, or man-like beast, dressed up 18th-century regalia, complete with powdered wig, blowing on what appeared to be a tin whistle. Was this, perhaps, a depiction of the pied piper of liberalism leading all good conservatives astray? Or maybe it wasn't a whistle, but a pipe, a depiction maybe of what happens to you when you spend too much time in Amsterdam coffee shops?

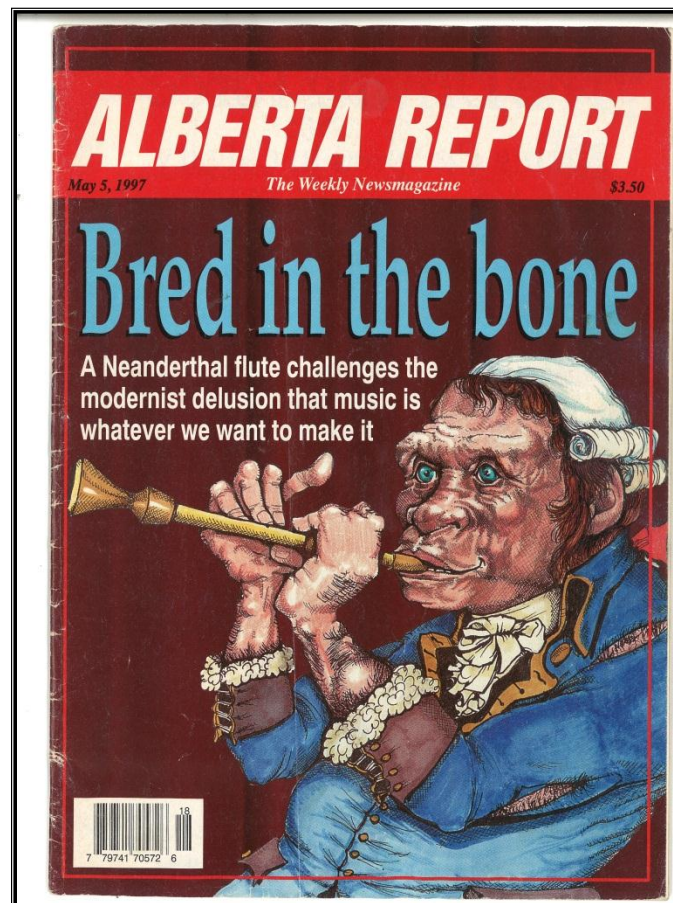


Figure 1

However, the image referred to the cover-story by Colby Cash, concerning the discovery of a fragment of bone by Slovenian archeologists in 1997.¹ The bone fragment seemed to have been a tool of some sort, and was carbon dated to be around 80,000 years old. It was discovered in an excavation of a Neanderthal site. What made this discovery significant is that the bone fragment appeared to have holes bored into it, remarkably similar to a primitive flute. This led to speculation that the bone fragment was indeed the remains of a flute created by Neanderthals.

The debate surrounding this discovery builds on some other recent revisionism regarding the Neanderthals. In contrast to the popular belief that the low-browed Neanderthals were shambling, inchoate, hairy oafs doomed to remain on the wrong rung of the evolutionary ladder, some archeologists and anthropologists have suggested that Neanderthals had actually developed a socially sophisticated culture, possessed language, and had an aesthetic sense. Discoveries of what has been claimed to be drawings dating from the Neanderthal period has led to speculation that the Neanderthals were capable of producing visual representation. This is a cognitive ability and demonstration of self-awareness had previously been the trademark of our more evolved (or at least longer-lasting) ancestors, the Cro-Magnons. Now, to this revisionist portrait of the Neanderthals the Slovenian flute adds additional intriguing speculation, that the Neanderthals were also capable of music.

This is where Cash's article comes in. He picks up the tale with an account of an amateur musicologist from Saskatoon, Bob Fink, who produced a reconstruction of the entire flute, based on the spacing of the sound holes of the extant part.² According to Fink, this Neanderthal artifact was not only a flute, but a flute which produced a diatonic scale, the same scale used in Western art music and most modern popular music. As one would expect, Fink's speculation has found both its detractors and supporters among archeologists, musicologists, and anthropologists. While Sash provides some desultory background of this debate, there is obviously a larger rhetorical purpose at work here. Alberta Report is hardly known for its editorial subtlety, and so the cover page caption and subtitle run as follows: "Flute concerts in a cave: A prehistoric discovery shows Neanderthals had better musical sense than modern composers."

Opening the magazine, the masthead brief (p.1) for the Cash's cover article reads as follows:

An 80,000-year old bone artifact from a Neanderthal cave is causing some serious head-scratching among academics. From four holes drilled in the bone, a Saskatoon musicologist has demonstrated that it was probably a flute. **Furthermore**, the holes correspond to the four most basic notes on the traditional 'diatonic scale,' which modern composers love to revile as an arbitrary recent Western fabrication. This mean music in a Neanderthal cave was probably more civilized than John Cage's latest discordant racket in Carnegie Hall.

It was evident that I wouldn't be reading very much about John Cage's latest new piece in Carnegie Hall, since Cage died in 1993, which demonstrates that Alberta Report's editors were more concerned with making a rhetorical point than they were with historical accuracy; which brings me to the point of this paper.

As one reads the article, it is clear that Cash and Alberta Report had found a kindred spirit in Mr. Fink, who believes that the apparent use of do-re-mi by the Neanderthals is evidence of the natural occurrence and supremacy of the diatonic scale. In fact, Mr. Fink maintains a web site--as well as an ideological position on--the subject. In an essay that appears on the web site, Fink maintains that the discovery of this Neanderthal flute (assuming it is one) is "the most powerful practical evidence ever in support of there being a natural foundation to the diatonic scale."³

As it turns out, Alberta Report had larger fish to fry than the foundations of music. Further reading reveals that Fink's flute has been used to play an overture to a reactionary attack on 20th century music. I quote this passage from the article in its entirety, not only as a nice example of rhetorical *climax*, but also how the author manages to sum up the history of 20th-century music in a manner which is simultaneously reactionary, racist and homophobic; not to mention factually and historically inaccurate:

After the Second World War, musical academics started to experiment with prying the listening public away from traditional styles altogether. French composers became infatuated with experiments in "music concrete," incorporating street and natural noises like Olivier Messiaen's famous bird songs. Meanwhile, American jazz composers, motivated partly by the desire to break free from the melodic laws of white-dominated music, developed an atonal "free jazz" which featured loud squeaks, bleats and various sorts of infernal tootling. Jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman devised his own "harmolodic" compositional method, and other jazz composers followed with their own self-devised techniques, notations and pitch rules.

Meanwhile, electronic musicians used computers to produce "microtones," dividing the octave into thousands of clashing notes instead of a few harmonious ones. A favourite instrument was the whooping, wailing theremin, which can play any pitch, on or off the scale, and whose notes wobble wildly. And then there was the American John Cage, the smirking homosexual jester of music theory. Cage "prepared" pianos for performance by inserting detritus into the strings; he advocated "aleatoric" music, with notes selected entirely by chance; and among his famous "works" are one in which 14 radios are tuned to different stations and left playing, and another which consists of performers sitting quietly without playing for four minutes and thirty-three seconds.

The enthymeme is obvious: atonal, modernist music is unnatural, and as for those who compose it, well, need we say more? Besides the homophobic stance, the author of this article is taking particular exception to many of the principle musical genres of the 20th century. What is interesting is the manner in which the names of the genres themselves-- i.e., atonal music, aleatoric or "chance" music, serial composition, and electronic and computer music—are used as metonyms, demonstrating how the genre itself can perform as a communicative construct and itself be persuasive.

What Cash—quite unintentionally—demonstrates is how, in the 20th century, it is the stated genre of a piece of music—and not the music itself—that often became the dominant communicative element. Insofar as musical genres can exert a persuasive force, and form expectations and reactions from audiences or potential audiences, I would like to discuss 20th-century musical genres from a rhetorical standpoint.

Discussion of musical generally runs in two interrelated themes: one of classification and one of communication. It is the former function—classification—which has been more widely studied in musicology and music history. In terms of classification, musical genre is traditionally taken to be synonymous with musical form, or function. We might, for example, compare the first movements of two symphonies, one by Haydn and one by Mozart, and analyse their use of sonata form. Bach's *Art of the Fugue* can be regarded as a systematic exploration of the contrapuntal possibilities of the genre of the fugue. Chopin's *Nocturnes* are often studied or compared as a group, representing the formal genre of the Nocturne. And so on.

But why did Chopin call these works *Nocturnes*? Why did Bach entitle his great solo harpsichord work "*Concerto in the Italian Style*?" In the 20th century, why did Prokofiev one of his symphonies "*Classical Symphony*?" Assuming these titles were not deliberately arbitrary, the choice of these titles demonstrates that the concept of genre meant something very specific to these composers, and that they assumed it would mean something very specific to their audiences as well. Therefore, through the act of naming a piece a composer is often also communicating its genre to the audience.

Claudio Guillen, speaking of literary history, has described genres as an "invitation to form," and I believe that this notion can be applied equally to music. When a composer applies a generic formal title to a piece—minuet, sarabande, sonata, requiem mass or motet—he or she is articulating a set of expectations to be shared with the audience. Jeffrey Kallberg describes this as "a kind of 'generic contract' [that] develops between composer and listener: the composer agrees to use some of the conventions, patterns and gestures of a genre, and the listener consents to interpret some aspects of the piece in a way conditioned by this genre."⁴ If the naming of a piece of music—and by so doing placing it within a generic category—is a widespread means by which a composer communicates meaning from the musical work to the listener, then it is a form of communication that can be subjected to rhetorical analysis. This has become especially important in the 20th century, because—as we will see, if an audience—or music critic—is unable to generically contextualize a piece of music then the claim will usually be made the music is not accessible.

At this point I'd like to provide some historical background on the interrelationships between musical genre and rhetoric; which are as old as the disciplines themselves. I think it is possible to imagine a proto-rhetorical period, in pre-Homeric times, when poetry and music were integral to one another; when they were one and the same art.

As Eric Havelock and others have pointed out, in Homeric Greece music and poetry were equal partners in the presentation of preserved speech, the formulaic language, by the specialists to whom it had been entrusted—or “the bards the people,” in the words of Heraclitus.⁵

There were no rhetorical treatises in Homeric times (unless you count the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves). But if there were, music would have been present as the original, and dominant—or proto-rhetorical—combined forms of *memoria*, and especially *actio*. Or, as Athenaeus stated, some 1,000 years later, about 200 A.D., “in ancient times, music was an incitement of bravery.” By the time of Aristotle, there *were* treatises on rhetoric and music theory, and the two disciplines had already separated. In the Greek classical period, music theory existed in three related areas:

- 1) The mathematical aspects of musical phenomena;
- 2) The analysis of the underlying structures of music compositions themselves, and,
- 3) The study of the effects of music on character and its role in education.

With respect to this final theme, Aristotle states in his *Politics*: “Socrates in the *Republic* does not do well in allowing only the Phrygian harmony along with the Dorian, and that when he has rejected the aulos among the instruments; for the Phrygian harmony has the same effect among harmonies as the aulos among instruments—both are violently exciting and emotional.” The quote is interesting because here we have a definition of music by two types of genres:

- 1) the harmonic structure of the composition (particularly identified by mode);
- 2) The medium (vocal or instrumental) of performance.

In other words, what Aristotle and Socrates said is that a particular music genre can communicate meta-musically, i.e., it can exert a persuasive force, and can therefore be analyzed rhetorically. I am not referring to the connection between music and rhetoric that we are more familiar with, i.e., the application of literary rhetorical figures and tropes by analogy to the analysis of musical structures. This occurred much later, in the Renaissance and more especially in the Baroque periods, and is a fairly specific historical phenomenon. Rather, I am using the term “rhetoric,” in its wider sense, referring to the many complex ways in which a writer, artist or composer is able to communicate with—and persuade—an audience.

This is an important distinction to make, in order to clarify the distinction—and draw some interesting parallels—between Rhetoric as a discipline and rhetoric as a communicative process on the one hand, and Music as a Discipline and music theory as a communicative process on the other. In his book *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, Thomas Cole states that “Rhetoric is to poetry and eloquence what science is to magic, or philosophy to mythology, or politics and jurisprudence to the rule of ancestral

tradition.”⁶ Cole points out that science is a successor to mythology in the same way that rhetoric is a “postrevolutionary” mode of discourse that sheds light on the human condition. Although Cole does not discuss music, he might have added that music theory is to music as rhetoric is to poetry and eloquence. The view of rhetoric as a discipline unto itself has often obscured its origin in Ancient Greece of the 4th and 5th centuries B.C., who preferred to suggest that teaching and instruction might be more reliable than appealing to the Muse for eloquence in poetry or music. This decontextualization has been a disservice to the discipline of rhetoric, just as the decontextualized study music theory, has impoverished that discipline.

In the Middle Ages the study of musical genre is completely dominated by its place in the liturgy. The contrast between medieval secular and liturgical music can be described entirely by genre. For instance, dance music as a genre was considered profane and unacceptable for liturgical use. We have some of the first documented cases of instrumental genre exerting a rhetorical influence, in that certain instruments—such as the violin—were considered unsuitable for music to accompany the worship of God. That, of course is why so little secular music from the middle ages has survived—it was a largely oral tradition not considered worthy of writing down by the monks. A good deal of medieval music theory is very closely aligned with theological symbolism and liturgical considerations. As a result, rules regarding certain harmonies or harmonic progressions in medieval theory—such as forbidding the use of augmented fourth or parallel thirds—were given theological justification.

The liturgical music of the Middle Ages is entirely dominated by the persuasive genre of form. Mass and motet had specific generic conventions that made the “generic contract” fairly. The structural compositional form of a cantus firmus mass, for example, set up a highly structured set of expectations, and produced a “generic contract,” not just between the composer and the audience, If I had been a composer then, I would have found all this rather intimidating: It’s one thing to endure a poor audience reception at the premiere of a new work, but quite another to risk eternal damnation because of an augmented fourth. but also—which must have been rather intimidating for the composer--with God.

The primacy of vocal music in the Middle Ages was inherited by composers in the Renaissance, which, generally speaking, is also regarded as an age of vocal music. But it is also a time when instrumental genres begin to emerge. The Renaissance was also the time of the rise of the European universities, the spread of the printed word, and the emergence of rhetoric as one of the primary disciplines in the university curriculum. It is also during the Renaissance, and more so in the Baroque, that we begin to see musical analysis expressed in terms of literary rhetorical theory. This is where our most familiar connections between music and rhetoric come from. Certainly, most of the research surrounding interconnections between music and rhetoric look at the attempts made by Renaissance and Baroque music theorists who applied literary rhetorical theory to musical analysis, chiefly by providing musical analogies for rhetorical figures, such as

Joachim Burmeister in his *Musica Poetica* (1606). So, the pairing of voices, either contrapuntally or homophonically is described as *anadiplosis*; a point of musical imitation, such as in a fugue or canon, is considered *anaphora*, and so on (see for example, the work of musicologists such as George Buelow).

It is during the Baroque period that we see the overt connection drawn between musical theory and rhetorical theory, as exemplified by one of the best-known sources of the period, Johann Mattheson, in this statement from *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister*:

Our musical disposition is different from the rhetorical arrangement of a mere speech only in theme, subject or object: hence it observes those six parts which are prescribed to an orator, namely the Exordium, Narratio, Propositio, Confirmatio, Confutatio, and Peroratio.

This application of rhetorical analogues to Baroque music is more interesting as an expression of the rise of literacy and the printing than it is as means of musical analysis. Here is a direct co-relation between the increasing availability of printed music and the interest in the Baroque in applying the terms and concepts of rhetorical theory to music. For instance, rhetorical figures like anadiplosis, epistrophe, chiasmus, and so on, are much easier to visualize—and actually perceive when at the level of the musical passage—when they are laid out on a printed page.

More interesting, in terms of the application of rhetorical concepts to music, is the doctrine of the affections. Although as a comprehensive, named, theoretical concept or compositional determinant the Doctrine of the Affections is essentially 19th-century wishful thinking, it is true that in the Baroque, certain affects—i.e., the musical expression of idealized emotional states—were associated with particular musical genres—madrigal, aria, sarabande, and so on: essentially, a rhetoric of genre.

I think it that is during the classical period – in the music of Haydn and Mozart -- that we find the greatest congruency between the three types of music genre that I identified earlier: , i.e., structural, instrumental, and harmonic/tonal. By this I mean that the three genres were integrated to such a degree that they essentially communicated the same set of criteria to an audience, or potential audience. For example, consider what is communicated simply by the genre of the piano sonata, by Haydn or Mozart. There is a remarkable degree of consistency, in overall length of the work, number and order of the movements, and so on. The first movement is in sonata-allegro form, followed by a slow movement, followed by a minuet, then a rondo.

When Charles Rosen, in his landmark book, *The Classical Style*, refers to the Classical Style, he is referring to an integration of the three genres, i.e., instrumental, formal, and harmonic/tonal. Typical of this is Rosen's description of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto and his final piano concerto (K.595), where he states that these two concertos "depend

more upon the delicate interplay of chamber music than the dramatic interplay of concerto style.” For Rosen, what he terms the “Classical Style” is virtually synonymous with genre.

The 18th-century genre of the string quartet, for example, was for the cognoscenti. symphonies and overtures were for public performance, sonatas, duos and trios were for performance by amateurs: The instrumentation not only defines the musical genre, but is also enthymematic of the socioeconomic status of its intended audience. When one wrote a “string quartet,” there was a certain set of expectations that arose simply by the evocation of that instrumental genre: it would be in four movements, each of which could be expected to conform to certain formal structures, and so on. Beyond that, string quartets were more “serious,” they were for the musical cogniscenti. This notion was pushed to its extreme with Beethoven, so that in the Romantic period the genre of string quartet became the vehicle by which the composer-as-hero made his most profound rhetorical utterances. Related, to believe to what I’ve called “generic integration,” Adorno had this to say about Beethoven: “In him, the power of the system (the sonata is the system as music) equals that of experience, each reciprocally producing the other.”⁷

In many ways, if we regard Beethoven’s “system” –as Adorno puts it—as the height of generic integration, we can see in the Romantic period as tendency toward generic disintegration. This is epitomized, I believe, by the profusion of so-called “character pieces,” in the Romantic piano repertoire of composers like Schumann, Brahms, Schubert, Mendelsohn, and, above all, Chopin. Realizing that the piano compositions they were writing could not be called ‘sonatas’ in the generic sense of the word, these composers began to articulate a more fragmented vocabulary of rhetorical genre that was a prelude to the generic disintegration that we see in 20th century music.

In the 20th century, our accumulated sense of historical musical repertoire, intensified as in no previous historical period by the availability of recordings, created a new tendency in audiences—and recording company marketers—to create a new series of musical genres based on musical history: what I call super-genres. Typically, we divide Western music history into several eras medieval, renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, modern and contemporary. To these we might add—depending on one’s preference historical niceties—a couple of others, such as pre-classical, impressionistic, neo-classical, and so on.

This is the principle way by which musical genre communicates expectations to 20th-century audiences—or potential audiences—of concert music. “What sort of music do you like?” the question goes. Chances are, in typical conversation, the answer would not come back: I like cantus firmus masses, or I just love chromatic madrigals, or, I’m partial to sonata-rondo form. What we’re more likely to hear is: I like medieval music, or just love Renaissance music, or I’m partial to the Classical Style. If you’re a reader of Alberta Report, you might also say you don’t like that contemporary music.

Wayne Booth, in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, suggests what he calls a “rough-and-ready” reminder of what constitutes a genre, suggesting that [works] “are not usefully grouped unless they are similar in quite precise ways: in general pattern or sequence, in technique, in medium, and in effect. A genre, in this approach, will consist only of two works sufficiently alike on all four counts to allow me to say: these two authors were, almost certainly, trying for similar achievements, and they could presumably have learned from each other how to do it; consequently I may, by learning from each, discover standards for judging the achievement of either.”⁸

In the 20th century, the profusion of genres has made Booth’s “rough and ready” technique—which would have worked quite well as a “Rough Guide” for classical music up until the end of the 1st World War—useless for the average person attempting to make sense of world of contemporary concert music. Take three string quartets for example: say, by Schoenberg, Ligeti, and John Zorn. The only one of Booth’s four counts where we could find similarity is on the instrumental genre, i.e., we could agree that each was composed for string quartet.

I would like to propose that for much 20th and 21st century new music, the theoretical construct of the musical work became the principle musical genre. In other words, music-theoretical concepts, such as free atonalism, serial, 12-tone, aleatoric, became the principle means by which composers attempted to provide a musical context for their works. However, because these works often used harmonic techniques that were experimental or a radical departure from other harmonic languages, there was often a very limited context within which to place these works. And so the 20th-century composer was faced with a doubly difficult rhetorical situation: not only did he have to create a work of musical integrity, but he also had to provide the generic context for the audience. That is rather like expecting Cicero to not only deliver a great oration, but to be the architect and builder of the Senate building as well. The best illustration of this is the rise of the importance of program notes at new music concerts.

Imagine if you were lucky enough to be at a subscription concert in late 18th century Vienna, where you were to hear a new piano sonata by Beethoven. Imagine sitting down and reading something like this in a program:

In the 4th movement of this work I have created a hybrid musical structure which combines the tonic-dominant thematic contrast of sonata form with the recurring theme idea of rondo form. However, in order to provide harmonic contrast with the second movement, I have chosen to emphasise the subdominant key—F major, as for thematic development in my fourth movement...

But this is precisely the sort of program notes that audiences are often invited to read at new music concerts: Because it is often the case that a contemporary composer, when creating a new work, is simultaneously working out a new theoretical construct. The

program note thus becomes a kind of *entechnical* dialectic, where the composer attempts to provide context; or a theoretical *apologia*, if you will. While music is not best described by the printed word, the composer has little choice if she wants to provide such a generic context for the audience.

When Cash made his derisive comments about 20th-century music, what he is actually reflecting is a popular sentiment which seems to be based on the fact that contemporary music has failed to be persuasive as an integrated musical genre. After all, when a new composition is premiered, you only get to read the program notes at the time you first hear the music in concert. With new music, then, the theoretical construct of a musical work becomes a rhetorical utterance beyond the music itself. This is why Cash is able to refer derisively to “serial,” aleatoric, “atonal”, “free jazz,” and so on. Ironically, the music-theoretic rhetoric of genre which many contemporary composers attempted to use to convince their colleagues or potential audiences of the integrity of their creative act has become became the stick to beat them with.

One of the rhetorically dominant musical genres to emerge in the 20th Century was an appeal to technology. Describing a musical genre solely by the technology used to create it is unique to contemporary music. By technology, I am referring to electronic technologies, particularly advances in electronic sound synthesis and the use of digital multimedia, not only in the digitization of sound, but in the use of computer algorithms by composers like Xenakis to generate compositional structures. This is not to say that technology has not had an important role in the history of music genre prior to the 20th Century. In fact, it is possible to describe the history of music through a history of technological innovation—the invention of the organ—or an analogue synthesizer, of sorts, how the invention of steel strings for bowed instruments allowed solo instruments a greater volume and gave rise to the solo concert style of the 18th Century, and so on. Many of the great composers were extremely interested in the latest musical technologies and in some cases were themselves forces for technological innovations. Beethoven for example, in the late 1790's, lobbied extensively for the re-engineering of the fortepiano of Mozart's day into the louder, more resonant and sturdier instrument that we know recognize as he modern piano⁹

However, while technological advances in musical instruments were of great importance to musicians and composers in the classical period, genre was still essentially a function of musical form and function, i.e., a new piano sonata by Beethoven was hailed because it was a new sonata, not because he performed it on a new piano. By contrast, many concerts in the 50 years, or recordings of this music, have been described by titles such as the following: “Electronic and computer-processed music by contemporary American Composers.” Or, to quote a program note from IRCAM in Paris: “An ensemble of programs destined to structure the sounds or the phrases collected by the control processes of the MAX computer program.” Note here, once again, the use of the program note in an attempt to create an immediate generic

context for the audience. It is the technology through which the composition has been realized which has become the musical genre.

Glenn Gould's abandonment of the concert hall was itself the creation of a new technological genre—or counter-genre—in response to the ritual of the social conventions of public piano recital. This is because Gould's retreat into the recording studio was as much about the new possibilities of recording technology as it was a reaction against the contemporary musical genre of the public concert. It is also an example of a technological genre, along with computer and electronic music. Gould believed that the ritualistic, 19th-century conventions of the public performance stood in the way of the true realization of a piece of music. For Gould, the public performance itself was a type of musical genre which was archaic, anti-musical, and could now be made obsolescent by the recording studio. However, it is not a technological compositional genre, but rather a performance genre, or as I have suggested, counter-genre.

To the profusion of new musical genres we can also add their rhetorical function as an expression of cultural expectations. I recall attending a concert of new music by Canadian composers. One piece on the program was entitled "No Longer than 10 minutes." I don't recall the compositional or even the instrumental genre of the piece, but the title provides its economic or business genre. The title is an ironic reference to the convention in new music commissioning circles to request the commissioned composer not to write a work that exceeds ten minutes. Commissioning programs for contemporary music often calculate the amount of a commission by the length of the work. So the longer the work, the more expensive the grant application has to be and the less likelihood it will get funded. As well, works in excess of 10 or fifteen minutes are more difficult to program because they require more rehearsal time and are more difficult to fit into programs that have to balance traditional repertoire with newer pieces.

A piece of about 10 minutes allows you to program another piece on the same half of the program. For instance, what we might typically do is program the new piece immediately following the intermission on the second half of the program, but ensure the last piece on the program is Bach's canon. Such is the power of the rhetoric of genre, that one sure way to lose half your audience at intermission is to put the Haydn and Mozart string quartets on the first half of the program, and devote the entire second half of the program to the premiere of a 35-minute, single-movement string quartet that is, according to the 2-page program note, based on a set of mathematical permutations of the same all-combinatorial hexachord used by Schoenberg in his 4th string quartet. The various unfoldings of the hexachordal permutations are articulated in a continuously uniform tone colour with little dynamic or tempo variation in order to provide the hexachordal unfoldings maximum exposure."

That's an actual quote from a program kept from a concert a couple of years ago. It demonstrates the enormous influence that genre as a persuasive, rhetorical force has had in the 20th century. The fact that the proclaimed genre of this new quartet was an atonal and serial is persuasive enough to create a clear sense of expectations in the audience even before the first notes are played. Unfortunately, for much contemporary music of the last 50 years, the rhetoric of musical genre has had a negative influence on audiences.

Edward Said has pointed out, "there is an enduring, perhaps even atavistic quality to certain aspects of the performance, interpretation and production of Western classical music that can be studied and examined precisely because the integrity and specialization involved nevertheless converge upon other cultural and theoretical issues that are not musical, or that do not belong completely to the sphere of music."¹⁰ In other words, this is why the Alberta Report article I began with is able to evoke various 20th-century musical genres--atonal, aleatoric, academic —In a series of enthymemes which use these genres to support a series of racist, homophobic and sneeringly anti-intellectual statements. Such discourse is never on a musical level, always on a generic level.

Earlier, I mentioned how, through the act of naming a piece, a composer engages in an act of rhetorical persuasion by leading the audience member to believe that he or she is about to hear a piece which will conform to certain generic specifications. The truth of this can be demonstrated by the way some composers have attempted to avoid this tendency for generic classification in the 20th century, in the same way that many 20th-century painters attempted to forestall representational interpretations of their abstract paintings. If you entitle a painting *Young Girl with Parasol*, people are going to look for a young girl with a parasol, and complain if they don't see one (or if it doesn't meet with their expectations of what a young girl with a parasol looks like). Of course, sometimes this is exactly what an abstract artist did want to communicate, and so the representational title was necessary to help articulate the difference between sign and symbol. However, in some cases the artist wanted to remain purposely ambivalent, and so provided their paintings with titles such as *Blue on Green No.2*, and so on.

Another method was to borrow from the so-called abstract art form, music, and give their paintings analogical musical titles, such as Kandinsky's use of titles as "Improvisation, Fugue, and Jocular Sounds" for some of his paintings. Similarly, many 20th century composers sought to escape the 'generic contract' by avoiding generic titles for their compositions. However, given the weight of generic history in music, this was extremely difficult to do. First of all, unless you wished to propose an ironic counter-genre (which would essentially defeat your purpose of being non-rhetorical), any historical formal title—sonata, rondo, suite, and so on, is out. Secondly, if you wanted to avoid the programmatic interpretations (i.e. the *Girl with the Parasol*, or rather, to evoke Debussy—in what I call the *Girl with the Flaxen Hair syndrome*) programmatic titles were also to be avoided. Not just overtly programmatic titles such as that, but any

title employing literal language that could be subject to analogical interpretation. Thirdly, one might wish to avoid specifying a particular instrument, or perhaps the piece was an electronically-realized composition. Therefore, the composer would not want to give a piece an instrument-specific genre, such as String Quartet No. 1. The result was, in the 1950's and 60's, a series of works by composers such as Morton Feldman, Lou Harrison, Xenakis, Boulez and others, with titles such as Polyphony # 10 (by Boulez, and preceded, of course by nine others), or Feldman's titles such as Piece No.1, Tape Piece No.2, and so on.

In short, the attempt to deny the rhetoric of musical genre had created what could be called a generic *aporia* in 20th-century musical discourse, an *aporia* which, if not perplexing to the composers, was certainly perplexing to some potential audiences. This discourse—or lack of it—was famously epitomized in 1958 by American composer Milton Babbitt's article entitled, *Who Cares if You Listen*. Here, Milton Babbitt suggests that the kind of musical composition he and his colleagues were engaged in belongs exclusively to the expert—the *cognoscenti*—in the same sense that appreciation of pure scientific or mathematical research belongs to the small community of scientists for who it is intended. Here, Babbitt has articulated another type of 20th-century musical genre: the musical composition as proof-of-theoretical construct. In fact, this was the manner in which a great many serial compositions were composed by Babbitt and the generation of composers who followed him in the Columbia/Princeton/Eastman school. A composer might begin with a theoretical investigation of how a particular tone-row behaved under certain mathematical operations. These operations on the tone-row were then turned into a composition that illustrated the set-theoretic operation. This, of course, is why program notes were so important—they were the analogue of the scientist writing up his experiment.

But this kind of “genre” was often—from the audience's perspective, lacking in context. In fact, the context-free quality of serial language was something that was aimed for by composers of this school. As Benjamin Boretz writes:

The absence of “aboutness” in the languages of the musical and visual arts, at least, frees them from the constraints of conventional norms of syntactical and lexical formation and association. As a result, they are free to create their own norms contextually from much simpler perceptual-assumptive bases. Hence, for example, works of music are constructable from a general notion of “music” without the *essential* intervention of stages identified as say, “tonal” or “twelve-tone,” which would be analogous to the construction of a particular English utterance wholly from a system that defines “language” in general, without the essential intervention of an English dictionary or grammar.”¹¹

Yet it is context which provides genre with its power to be rhetorically communicative. Without shared context there can be no really meaningful use of genre as a communicative device. Musical styles which—according to the composers—were

“about” the fact that they were not “about” anything, denied their audiences the sense of shared expectation which musical genre had provided. In the late 20th century, the re-emergence of older musical genres—and the sense or reassured expectations that they convey to audiences—can be seen as a reaction to this situation.

Is the recent success of composers such as John Taverner, Gorecki, solely due to the fact that they seem to be using tonal harmonies in their composition? No. Taverner and Gorecki draw on the sense of communion between composer and audience which a shared genre can establish—in this case the various genres associated with liturgical music, particularly the Catholic liturgy. One of the reasons that some contemporary operas have achieved success despite their use of what we might generically describe as non-tonal music—such as works by John Adams, Phillip Glass and Murray Schafer—is because the genre of opera-qua-opera has a sufficient multi-contextual generic structure—including opera as public event and spectacle—to overcome the fact that the music may lack a generic context for some audience members.

So: despite what Cash – and Alberta Report --claim, it was not the abandonment of the so-called diatonic scale by 20th-century composers that created a gulf between some contemporary music and its audiences, but the desire to create counter-genres as a reaction against the historical accumulation of the rhetorical baggage of musical genre. The resultant lack of context led to a failure of several 20th-century musical genres to be rhetorically persuasive and therefore find an audience. But surely I don't have to tell you this: Just go and ask any Neanderthal composer.

¹ Colby Cash. *Flute Concerts in a Cave: A prehistoric discovery shows Neanderthals had better musical sense than modern composers*. Alberta Report: Vol. 24, No. 21, 1997, pp30-32

Bob Fink. *Neanderthal Flute: Musicological Analysis*. 1997.
<http://www.webster.sk.ca/greenwich/fl-compl.htm>

³ Ibid

⁴ Jeffrey Kallberg. *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex History and Musical Genre*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996. Pg.5

⁵ Eric Havelock. *The Muse Learns to Write*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986. pp.72-74

⁶ Thomas Cole. *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*. Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1991. pg.1

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno. *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music. Fragments and Texts*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Edmund Jephcott, tr. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998. Pg.160.

⁸ Wayne C. Booth. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago and London. University of Chicago Press, 1974. pp.208-209

⁹ Tia DeNora. *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius*. Berkley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1995. Pg.173.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said. *Musical Elaborations*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1991. Pg.12

¹¹ Boretz. *Nelson Goodman's Languages of Art*. Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory, Pg.43