Genre theory and the early nineteenth century

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Background. The following authors have produced significant publications in the area of genre studies and the early nineteenth century: Carl Dahlhaus (1983), Marcia Citron (2000), Jim Samson (1989), and Jeffrey Kallberg (1988). One of Carl Dahlhaus’ central arguments, is that after 1800 the concept of genre in relation to musical compositions ceased to be important. Due to musical works in some genres deviating from pre-established norms of style, for example, Dahlhaus asserted that the concept of an individual work gained increased importance. Marcia J. Citron has contested this argument stating that a genre doesn’t have to be completely fixed and predictable. Dahlhaus’ view, she argues, prevents a specific genre from developing and expanding. In line with such recent thinking, Jeffrey Kallberg’s theory that composers often mixed genres deliberately is directly applicable to works that didn’t adhere to the usual style or form of a particular genre.

Aims. This paper aims to examine critically the central arguments of genre theory by exploring seminal texts in genre studies. Building on this, I wish to provide a suitable model or approach in which the early nineteenth century piano duet, previously unexplored in this context, can be assessed.

Main Contribution. At the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, the concept of ‘genre’ as a fixed entity was challenged by contemporary composers. One such example is Schubert’s piano duet the Grand Duo Sonata in C D812 (1824) which surpassed the usual piano duet style of that time. Research relating to this work and other Schubert piano duets awoke me to such historical questioning and I began to explore genre theories both generally and specifically relating to early nineteenth century music. Although critics such as Jim Samson have contributed to genre theory (using Chopin’s Impromptus as a case-study), a gap still exists in this area of research for other composers’ works to be considered in this context.

Implications. By critically assessing genre theories and their relation to early nineteenth century music, an alternative interpretation of works that have puzzled critics as being ‘outside’ the genre norms can be explored.

The impetus for this paper grew from my realization that one genre of the early nineteenth century, namely the piano duet, has been both misconstrued and neglected within genre studies. My own research into Schubert’s piano duets revealed a serious lack of investigation into this area with only one short article, by Margaret Notley, which addresses issues of genre in Schubert’s works from the four-hand repertoire. Despite its merits, Notley’s article adopted a very limited approach to these works which resulted in omitting three of the duets from her discussion – details of which shall be discussed later. Such lack of insight into genre theory inspired me to investigate current approaches in this area and to hopefully elucidate some key issues: How do we define genre? Can we differentiate between style, form and genre? What role then does style and form play in defining a genre? To what extent do extra-musical elements such as environment, reception and the communicative possibilities within a work contribute to our understanding of genre? When probing these questions in this paper, the underlying goal shall always be to seek fresh insights into the piano duet, and more specifically into Schubert’s piano duets and to broaden both our understanding and interpretation of his piano literature for four hands. In particular, Dahlhaus’ contribution to genre studies shall be considered as well as more recent reactions to his ideas, namely the responses of Jeffrey Kallberg, Jim Samson and Marcia Citron. In surveying genre theories of such writers, my aim is to show how new approaches to nineteenth century compositions have opened up new ways of considering how genre functions in music of this time.
Preliminary approaches to the piano duet genre

The relative neglect of the piano duet genre within Schubert scholarship, compared to Schubert’s piano solo music for example, has also resulted in little attention in the area of genre studies. Although Dahlhaus has written extensively on genre, recent scholars have questioned aspects of his theories due to the seemingly contradictory and limited arguments he presents. In light of such recent questionings, it is therefore surprising that Margaret Notley’s article demonstrates an unquestioning reliance on Dahlhaus’ definition of genre. Notley asserts that ‘patterns of manner and affect, if not of form’ characterize Schubert’s four-hand music as a genre. Following this statement she immediately claims that the two duo sonatas and the fugue ‘do not fit’. The outright dismissal of these works leaves the discerning scholar with more questions than answers: If the Grand Duo Sonata is too elevated in style to be considered part of the duet genre (as Notley asserts) then how does this argument stand in relation to the earlier B flat sonata? Also, surely the popularity of sonatas as a musical form for such composers as Clementi and Mozart in their duets would have almost guaranteed that Schubert would also produce duo sonatas? Furthermore, by insinuating that the Grand Duo could be categorized as a serious work alongside the later solo sonatas, Notley immediately devalues other duets from being considered as serious works: for example, the Allegro in A minor (D947) and the Rondo in A major (D951), both composed in 1828. Through this omission, Notley also escapes crucial questions of how the Grand Duo impacted later duets by Schubert and also the importance of this duet in understanding Schubert’s vision of the capabilities of the duet genre. Another glaring omission is the F minor Fantasy (D940) from 1828 which is surely as serious a work as the Sonata in C. Would it not be more beneficial perhaps to examine the intentions and the expressive aesthetic attributes of these works instead of categorizing them in the way Notley has? Although Notley does claim that the serious and sociable co-exist in some of Schubert’s duets, there is too much left unanswered in her arguments.

Matters of genre: Exploring models for nineteenth century genres

What has always been central to genre is the idea of classification or convention. In this context one scholar, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, outlines the key aspects of generic classification in musical genres, namely: ‘function, style, scoring, length, site of performance, intended audience, manner and nature of reception, decorum of the performative experience, and value.’ In her discussion, Smith argues that works which do not subscribe to these norms are subject to exclusion. Schubert’s duo Sonata in C provides a fitting example for this argument: such eminent critics across the centuries, as Robert Schumann and Donald Tovey struggled to consider this work a duet – on the grounds that it was outside the norms of the domestic duet style. It is hardly a coincidence that Notley also chose to place the work outside the duet genre due to her perceptions of how genre should function. In line with this, Smith acknowledges that it is not uncommon for genres to undergo change in terms of their style. Furthermore, Kallberg observed that the mixing of genres was a common modification of style in the early nineteenth century. Therefore, the orchestral style in which Schubert composed the Sonata in C may have been unorthodox for the piano duet as a genre at that time but not untypical of what was occurring in art music across the board. The renowned Schubert scholar, Brian Newbould, also points out that when it comes to style in a work, often piano, quartet and orchestral styles overlap: an orchestral style is also found in other piano duets by Schubert, an example of which is the Allegro in A minor written in the final year of his life. Among the elements of generic classification as outlined by Smith, the notion of ‘function’ has played probably the most important role within Dahlhaus’ genre theories. In Dahlhaus’ discussion on genre he argues that ‘social function and compositional norm[s]’ are the defining elements of genre in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century however, he proposes that function – for example liturgy or dance – is replaced by aesthetic autonomy where genre takes second place to individual works. Although he acknowledges
that every musical work may not, and indeed need not, fit into a genre, his view of ‘genre’ ceasing to be important sparked a debate among later theorists. One of the central criticisms of Dahlhaus’ theory when he asserts that function in music was ‘obliterated entirely or relegated to the backstairs of music’, is that his interpretation of function is too limited. What has been called for is a more flexible interpretation of function and therefore an amendment of the typical classification system as outlined. Jim Samson acknowledges this when he outlines two new approaches that developed after Dahlhaus: firstly, a move away from artworks towards aesthetic experience and secondly the need for a more adaptable concept relating especially to function.

One theorist whose approach resonates strongly with my own studies is Jeffrey Kallberg who has discussed Chopin’s Nocturne in G minor in the context of genre theory. When discussing Dahlhaus’ over-reliance on function when defining genre, Kallberg makes a striking point: just because a specific genre cannot be linked to a specific function should not translate that no social function is present at all. Although most music-making in early nineteenth century Vienna was in the private or semi-private sphere, a social function was still most definitely present. Music in the salon, for example, was an integral part of cultural life and as the eminent Schubert scholar, David Gramit, recognizes, during a Schubertiade both Schubert’s close friends and society at large ‘shared culture through conversation and dancing, as well as through a serious interest in music.’ Kallberg requests that instead of focusing on the ‘constituent elements’ of genre that an interpretation of what is being communicated by these elements is much more effective.

Dahlhaus’ influence on Notley’s thinking about genre is apparent when we consider how Notley focuses on ‘style’ as opposed to the significance of this elevated style and what it may be communicating about the genre and possibly about Schubert himself. One of the central tenets of this paper is that by creating the Grand Duo Sonata, Schubert sought to explore the expressive possibilities of the duet genre. Therefore, when considering the Grand Duo within the context of it’s genre, this paper concurs with Kallberg in seeking out what it was Schubert wanted to express in this work.

**Seeking balance:**
**Form, style and genre**

If one considers form or style as separate entities then naturally these components will seem isolated. They are only constituents of a genre and further elements of a genre itself require exploration in studies of this type. Jim Samson has identified that genre is ‘a more permeable concept than either style or form, because a social element participates in its definition.’ The importance of context, function and community validation, Samson continues, is important when defining genre. Samson also reveals, in another study, that a genre title may set up expectations regarding style and form but that the title itself will not reveal meaning as much as the interaction of all these elements will. What is interesting here is that although Schubert adopted a more elevated style in the Sonata in C, how this style interacted with the form, the environment and the history of the duet, can guide us to new understandings of the genre. When Samson mentions the importance of context and function in his argument, he introduces another important aspect of the piano duet: its reception history and how prejudices against the context – namely the salon have damaged the perception of these works. The function of these works has been long viewed as providing light entertainment to their audiences, as well as fulfilling a central role in musical culture in Vienna at that time.

**New perspectives:**
**Finding a common ground for the duet genre**

The characteristic dichotomy of style in Schubert’s duets brings its own issues when discussing genre and finding a uniform approach to consider these works. Although Notley only considered Schubert’s works in her discussion of the duet genre, I propose that a knowledge of what went before Schubert is central here due to the importance of the relationship between
performer and listener in the social environment as well as other contributing musical elements. As mentioned earlier, the sonata was frequently employed as a form in duet genres and Mozart’s duo Sonata in F K.497 (1786) described as an ‘almost uncomfortably great piece of domestic music’ would, for example, have impacted Schubert significantly in choosing this form within the duet genre. It is of interest to note that Donald Tovey, who, as mentioned earlier believed the Grand Duo to have been conceived as a symphony, admitted ‘being tempted to arrange [Mozart’s] sonata as a string-quartet in G with two violoncellos.’ If a model that focuses on the communicative and expressive aesthetic of these works is used, then the older approach of classification need not be so problematic. The results may be varying if all the works are considered but after 1824, the year of the Sonata in C, a marked development in Schubert’s style appeared in the duets alongside developments of his compositional approach within the forms he chose. Indeed the Schubert scholar, Christopher Gibbs, acknowledges 1824 (and here he includes the Grand Duo in his argument) as a period when ‘Schubert’s instrumental music [...] shifted from amateur to professional.’ It is largely due to this elevation in style and therefore expression that this paper requests that the communicative abilities of the duet genre be acknowledged and explored.

A way forward?

When considering genre, Kallberg argues that the categorizing of similar elements alongside interpretation is how this area should be approached. In his attempt to overturn the traditional understanding of genres, Kallberg embraces such criteria as ‘responses – past and present – traditions, neighbouring and contrasting genres, mixture and mutability.’ This provides numerous variants for a scholar to consider when re-evaluating a genre— in this case Schubert’s piano duets. The aim of this paper has been to open up new avenues of understanding as a long neglected genre makes its way back into scholarship today. Some of the questions are only beginning to be answered but mark the beginning of a very long journey of discovery.

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References


The Sonata in B flat (D617) composed in Zseliz in 1818, the Sonata in C (D812) also composed in Zseliz in 1824 and the Fugue in E minor (D952) composed in Baden in June 1828.

Notley (1997), 145.

Ibid.


Tovey (1972).


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Blom (1938), 273.

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