Operatic Knowledge Organisation
An Exploration of the Domain and Bibliographic Interface in the Classification of Opera Subgenres

Abstract:
The classification of Western art music is notoriously complex, and the classification of opera subgenres provides distinct challenges. So, this paper considers the classification of opera subgenres from a knowledge organisation perspective. The paper starts with a short examination of key ideas from genre theory and musicological writings on genre, as well as the idea of opera subgenres. The categorisation of opera subgenres in the music domain is examined, utilising key music essays and sources. The large number of opera subgenres is identified, and the subgenres are explored using the framework of hierarchical, equivalence and associative relationships. The treatment of opera subgenres in eight bibliographic classifications is examined, where it is found to both reflect the disarray of the music domain and offer distinct discords. A model is proposed which considers the classification of opera subgenres on two planes, combining the web of relationships between subgenres (inter-subgenre plane) with the categorisation of the subgenre’s constituent attributes (categorisation plane).

1.0 Introduction
Opera is a significant part of the study and performance of Western art music. Yet, opera does not appear to have a systematic classificatory framework for its subgenres, suffering from unmanageable quantities and a lack of a standardised set of subgenres. While the overall facets of music have been studied in knowledge organisation (Elliker 1994; Lee 2017a), and the medium facet has received particular attention (Lee 2017b; Lee and Robinson 2018), the form/genre facet within Western art music has not been deeply analysed. So, this paper considers the classification of opera subgenres. It utilises knowledge organisation theories and concepts to explore the classification of opera within the music domain, and to compare this with the treatment of opera subgenres within bibliographic classification schemes. Hence, knowledge organisation will be employed to help understand and to disentangle the so-called chaotic nature of opera subgenres.

The paper starts with a short review of key ideas about music genres and opera subgenres, from the perspective of Western art music. Next, the classification of opera is explored from the perspective of the music domain. Some musicological sources are analysed to illuminate the quantity of opera subgenres and to consider the relationships between different subgenres. The treatment of opera subgenres in eight bibliographic classification schemes is considered, demonstrating interesting discords with the music domain. Finally, a model of classifying opera subgenres is presented, which explores how the categorisation of constituent parts of opera subgenres can interplay with relationships between subgenres.
2.0 Introducing genre-as-classification

Studies and analysis of the idea of genre have a long pedigree and many different domains are interested in conceptualising and utilising the idea of genre. Frow (2006, 10), working in the realm of critical theory and literature, defines genre as “… a set of conventional and highly organizing constraints of the production and interpretation of meaning”, showing how genre is concerned with structure and rules for description. Genre’s role as a way of distinguishing things and taxonomic function (Frow 2006) is discussed by genre theorists and those within the music domain (see for example, Holt (2007) writing about popular music). Although the role of genre goes far beyond a taxonomic device (Andersen 2015), this paper is concerned with the taxonomic idea of genre, sitting alongside other papers in knowledge organisation which discuss genre categorisation in artistic forms (for example, Rafferty 2010).

What is meant by a musical genre requires consideration. First, note that although the idea of a musical genre can have a wide range of meanings, in this paper genres are considered to be individual groups of works within the Western art music tradition, rather than the term “Western art music” being the genre. Second, the position of genre in the faceted classification of music can become blurred with form (for further discussion see Elliker 1994 and Lee 2017a). Third, it is useful to consider what elements make up a genre. Frow (2006), writing from a general genre theory perspective, considers a genre to be constituted by a number of aspects including formal features, thematic structure, physical setting, “situation” and more. Tereszkiewicz (2014) says that works of the same genre will have similarities in form, content and function. Noteworthy in these writings are the presence of form and function, themselves often considered facets of music. Frow (2006) also includes extrinsic qualities, showing how genre moves beyond the intrinsic qualities of a musical work. Music discourse also seeks to define a musical genre’s attributes. Dahlhaus (1987) is a useful source and suggests that genre consists of text, function, medium and form. (These aspects have been translated into standardised music classification terminology.) The idea of medium – who is playing or singing the work – is particularly important: Samson (2015), positions instrumentation as a defining feature of genre, while Dahlhaus (1987) defines genre as the expected connection between form and medium.

This paper is concerned in particular with subgenres. Subgenres are defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (“subgenre, n.” 2019) as “A subdivision of a genre of literature, music, film, etc.”. A brief perusal of music literature suggests that subgenre is a valid term for types of opera: for example, Carter (2014) and Senici (2014) use the term subgenre in essays about opera, and a key encyclopedia entry for opera (Brown et al. 2001) also uses the term when referring readers elsewhere. So, what does it mean to be a subgenre of opera? At its most literal, any specific type of opera will count. When and how a subgenre becomes a subgenre in its own right, and on whose authority, is an intriguing question. For example, opera seria is a significant subgenre of opera (McClymonds and Heartz 2001); however, these works were called dramma per music at the time they were written, with the term “opera seria” being adopted by those writing from a historical viewpoint (McClymonds and Heartz 2001). This illuminates how subgenre creation and categorisation of operas into subgenres can be enacted by those removed from the works’ creation, such as historians and theorists.
3.0 The classification of opera in the music domain

The first stage of this research involves analysing the music domain’s conception of the classification of opera subgenres; to do this, sources of information from the music domain are needed, which illustrate the classification of opera subgenres. Searching the literature does not reveal any standard knowledge organisation systems for subgenres of operas. Instead, the alphabetical list of 69 “see also” links in the Grove Music Online article for opera ((Brown et al. 2001) is a starting point – Grove Music Online (2020; henceforth abbreviated to its common name of Grove) is the seminal encyclopaedia and source for the study of music. Importantly, two musicologists writing generally about opera and genre, Campana (2012) and Carter (2014) utilise this list when reflecting upon opera subgenres, and indeed Campana (2012) refers to the list as a typology. The Grove typology (Brown et al. 2001) contains 69 terms, of which 66 are types of musical-dramatic works. However, the Grove typology presents some issues. First, Campana (2012, 221) refers to the typology as something produced “without any ambition of thoroughness”. This can be confirmed by the inclusion of three non-genre terms (verismo, libretto, Jesuits) and the exclusion of confirmed subgenres of opera. Second, the typology raises some questions about what is included in the boundary of opera, such as, whether works for dissemination through film are really subgenres of opera. Third, the typology is an alphabetical list of generic labels, so further sources are needed to contemplate the structure of opera subgenres.

So, supplementary sources will also be used. Campana (2012) also refers to the Wikipedia table of subgenres of operas. This Wikipedia table (“List of opera genres” 2019) is a useful resource: some of its subgenres are not found in the Grove typology and some entries include descriptions of their relationships with other terms in the table. It is also pertinent to supplement these list-like KOSs with ideas about classification not contained within an actual KOS. Two musicological essays which (briefly) discuss the classification of opera subgenres will be used: an essay on genre and poetics by Campana (2012) and an essay questioning the nature of opera by Carter (2014). Finally, Grove entries for specific subgenres may also include implicit information about classification, so a selection of these can also be harvested.

The musicological sources identify that there is a large number of opera subgenres and that the wording used by musicologists suggests that this high number is not always helpful. For example, Campana (2012, 202) talks about the “copious and disparate typologies” found in music dictionaries – although she only explicitly mentions one music source – and later comments on the “sheer number of generic labels” (204) which exist. Similar language is used by Carter (2014, 17), who describes the contents of the Grove typology as a “bewilderingly large number”. Doubts about every subgenre’s usefulness and necessity can also be read into these discussions (Campana 2012). The ways that subgenres are distinguished and labelled attracts attention. For example, Carter (2014, 17) describes the Grove typology as a “terminological minefield”. So, in musicological thought it can be inferred that not only are there a large number of opera subgenres, but also that this is unusual or unexpected. Moreover, the subgenres of opera are, to musicological eyes, chaotic in number and type.

It is interesting to consider how the music domain contemplates relationships between subgenres of operas. As neither the Grove typology nor the Wikipedia table contain formal manifestations of relationships between subgenres, implicit information
will be utilised instead, such as comments found in Grove entries for specific subgenres. Ideas about subgenre relationships will be identified from these music sources and then reframed in knowledge organisation terms.

Hierarchical relationships are reflected in opera subgenres. For example, the subgenre conte lyrique has a short entry in Grove, where it is described as a “term used in the late 19th century for a particular kind of *opéra comique*” (“Conte lyrique” 2002; italics in original). This demonstrates a genus-species hierarchy (Aitchison, Gilchrist and Bawden 2000). The subgenres of opera also present more complex hierarchies, such as polyhierarchical relationships. For example, the film musical (Traubner, Gayda and Snelson 2001) has a parent subgenre of musical, but also a parent in the genre of films. The fait historique presents a different sort of polyhierarchy. Bartlet (2002) describes it as “a type of late 18th-century French *opéra* or *opéra comique* …” (italics in original); in other words, its parent could be one of two specific opera subgenres. Hierarchically, the subgenre of fait historique as a whole has two possible parents, but each exemplar of the subgenre would have only one parent (unlike the film musical). All these examples ask questions about the quantity of levels within opera: is the fait historique a subgenre or a sub-subgenre? This questions the ontological nature of the idea of opera subgenres.

Other types of relationships are also implied. For example, in the Grove entry for commedia per musica (“Commedia per musica” 2001), the term commedia in musica is given as an alternative, which depicts an equivalence relationship. Diminutives are another example of equivalence relationships found in opera subgenres. For example, the burla is described in Grove (Burla 2001) as one type of comic Italian opera, which can have the diminutive terms of burletta and burlettina. However, the term burletta has two meanings, as it can also refer to a particular type of English opera (Temperley 2001). This example demonstrates the complexities of equivalence relationships in opera, and the importance of separating out relationships based on labelling, from relationships based on meaning.

Associative relationships are also present. For example, Märchenoper and opéra féerie are both subgenres with plots drawn from fairy tales (Millington 2001; Bartlet 2001). These two subgenres could be considered to have an associative relationship, of an undefined nature.

Figure 1 depicts the combined hierarchical, equivalence and associative relationships, using the example subgenre of Märchenoper. Some of Märchenoper’s possible relationships are shown, including its associative relationship with opéra féerie (whose two possible parents are shown via dotted lines). Note that three of the four equivalence relationships for Märchenoper, taken from Millington’s (2001) description of variant terms, appear as entries in the Wikipedia table (“List of opera genres” 2019); this highlights how some of the discussion about the quantity of subgenres (for example, Campana 2012), could actually be related to alternative titles and the instability of generic labels. So, separating out the distinguishable subgenres from mere alternative appellations can help to order the chaos. Ultimately, examining relationships highlights the complexity of opera subgenres, and shows how knowledge organisation can usefully distil and disentangle the lists of subgenres found in sources such as Wikipedia and Grove.
4.0 The classification of opera in bibliographic classifications

Considering how opera is classified in bibliographic classification schemes is critical, and it is fruitful to compare this with the music domain. This comparison is aided by utilising the idea of accords and discords, from the framework of relationships between scientific and bibliographic classifications, developed in Lee, Robinson and Bawden (2019). Eight bibliographic classification schemes are utilised for this purpose: British Catalogue of Music Classification (Coates 1960), Dickinson Classification (Dickinson 1938), Flexible Classification (Pethes 1967), Universal Decimal Classification (British Standards Institution 2006), Subject Classification (Brown 1914), Dewey Decimal Classification (Dewey et al. 2003), and McColvin and Reeves (McColvin, Reeves and Dove 1965). There is not space to reproduce a summary of the results here, but key results are identified below. Interestingly, only eight out of the 17 consulted music classification schemes are found to include any terms for specific subgenres of opera and opera-like genres (Lee 2017a).

The first important point to note is the low numbers of opera subgenres. Firstly, relatively few subgenres are listed in the eight schemes: only a total of 27 classes for opera subgenres are represented (though three classes contain multiple subgenres, to be discussed below). Looking at the schemes without opera subgenres is also fruitful: for example, Library of Congress Classification (Library of Congress 2019), is generally an extremely detailed scheme; yet, it does not choose to list categories of opera nor separate opera from other musical-dramatic works (Library of Congress 2019). Interestingly, some schemes state their mistrust of opera categorisation explicitly: for example, the Expansive Classification (Cutter 1891-1904) and Olding’s (1954) classification both state that they do not consider dividing opera into subcategories to be useful.

This is in direct contrast to the music domain where the large numbers of subgenres was a focus point, and hence shows discord between bibliographic classification and the music domain. There are a number of possible explanations. First, the main rationale for the bibliographical classification schemes is retrieval; so, while many opera subgenres may exist, there may not be warrant for their inclusion in a bibliographic classification scheme. Second, the complexities and bewilderment commented upon by the musicologists might lead to lack of standardisation in subgenres, which in turn leads to a lower probability that subgenre information is useful to users. Third, the discord could be a reflection of the shallower levels of information seen in bibliographic classification schemes than domain-based classifications. However, the lack of opera subgenres in bibliographic classification schemes which are notoriously detailed (for example, Flexible Classification and Library of Congress Classification) suggests this is not the only (or even primary) explanation.

The eight bibliographic schemes also reveal a distinct lack of coherence between themselves: out of 27 classes, 14 appear in only one of the eight schemes. While six of these “single-appearances” could be explained away as they are from a notoriously detailed scheme (Flexible Classification), the other five cannot. The lack of coherence

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1 The Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms provides a potential additional source for the bibliographic classification of opera subgenres. However, a cursory glance through the variant terms attached to the entry for opera (Library of Congress 2020) shows equivalent or less detail than the bibliographic schemes, so has not been contemplated further within the space limitations of this paper.
could be considered a realisation of classification chaos, perhaps enhancing the views of the Olding and Expansive classifications about the foolishness of trying to categorise opera.

Fourteen subgenres appear in the combined bibliographic schemes which do not appear in the Grove typology or Wikipedia table, showing further discord between the music domain and bibliographic classification. In some cases the bibliographic classification scheme examples are more detailed than the music domain: for example, great operetta and small operetta appear in a bibliographic classification scheme but not in the Grove typology or Wikipedia table. This weakens any argument that the lack of subgenres in the bibliographic schemes is due to lack of detail. In other cases, the bibliographic classification schemes have broader categories which do not refer to specific subgenres but could be considered as broad types of opera – for example, light opera and comic opera. This suggests a domain/bibliographic discord in the idea of opera’s units.

The bibliographic classification schemes demonstrate some explicit relationships between subgenres. For example, Flexible Classification (Pethes 1967) has a hierarchical relationship in operetta, where the sub-classes of great operetta and small operetta have the class operetta as their parent. A form of equivalence can be seen in the use of combined classes for subgenres, such as McColvin and Reeves’s (McColvin, Reeves and Dove 1965) shared class for light opera, musical comedies and revues. So, there is some accord between bibliographic schemes and the domain, in that hierarchy and equivalence relationships are present, albeit with different levels of implicit-ness.

5.0 Towards a model of classifying opera subgenres

There is, however, another way of contemplating the classification of opera subgenres, away from their inter-subgenre relationships: consider the categorisation of the attributes of each subgenre. Sources in the music domain comment on this as a categorisation method. For example, Campana (2012) and Carter (2014) remark upon the different ways that subgenres are delineated in the Grove typology, though neither author is intending to provide a complete list of the distinguishing features found in the typology or from a theoretical perspective. Campana’s (2012) and Carter’s (2014) combined list of attributes include formal qualities (including the interrelation between speech, music and dance), subject matter, medium (in this case meaning the media of performance, such as radio or television), function (for example school operas), national operas and subgenres (relating to the idea of place) and a sense of historical period. (Note that as medium has another meaning in music classification (Lee and Robinson, 2018), the term “dissemination” will be adopted instead for the category containing foci such as television or film.) At this juncture it is useful to revisit Dahlhaus’ (1987) general list of a genre’s constituents; this sees some overlap (form and function), and also adds the ideas of medium (who is playing and performing) and text. If we were to argue that what distinguishes one subgenre from another is the same idea as what constitutes that subgenre (or genre), we can combine both sets of factors. Therefore, we could see that loosely speaking, opera has (at least) eight constituents, which translated into standardised music classification terms, are as follows: form, subject, dissemination, function, place, time, medium, and text.
Note that ideas such as place are complex in opera categorisation. Place can represent the boundaries of a subgenre’s world, its germination or its association. Furthermore, attributes do not always work independently. For example, there is a nebulous boundary between nationality and place, as hinted at in Carter’s (2014) depiction of “national genres”, and place can be associated with text via language. Ultimately, this categorisation of attributes is useful, but does not always distinguish between single subgenres: for example, opera buffa and burla both describe Italian comic operas of the 18th century. Put simply, categories are invaluable for studying shared properties of opera subgenres; however, they cannot always elide between one subgenre and another and cannot explicitly track genre development.

So, a model is proposed in Figure 2, which visualises opera subgenres as both a system of relationships between individual subgenres and as the categories of information which constitute individual subgenres. The model has two planes: the inter-subgenre plane and the categorisation plane. The inter-subgenre plane allows for the complexities and quantity of subgenres by disentangling the web of relationships between subgenres; whereas the categorisation plane shows how each subgenre contains categories of information, which could be seen as working in tandem with the subgenre-to-(sub)genre relationships found in the inter-subgenre plane. Links between the categorisations and music’s facets could be perceived, between categorisations which also appear as meta-facets (Elliker 1994) such as function, place, time and medium. (Form is, of course, already part of the form/genre facet (Elliker, 1994; Lee, 2017a)). These constituent-facet connections are demonstrated with freely-drawn blue arrows, representing the informal nature of these relationships. Finally, the associative relationship in the inter-subgenre plane could be concurrently viewed as a connection between subgenres which share particular constituents, especially for operas sharing the same subject material. This is also depicted with a freely-drawn blue arrow, representing the intangible nature of this connection. Therefore, this model demonstrates how knowledge organisation can be used to unpick and provide order to the music domain’s multitudinous collection of opera subgenres.

6.0 Concluding thoughts

Opera subgenres are viewed as being somewhat tumultuous from the perspective of the music domain. This paper has analysed the opera subgenre soup, in order to unpick what is happening. Using a knowledge organisation framework, it can be seen that at least some of the superfluous number of subgenres might be explained by the presence of the same subgenres appearing multiple times in resources with different labels. Furthermore, the subgenres of opera can be better understood as a complex web of different relationships, rather than through a one-dimensional list. Lastly, the two-plane model suggests that there are connections between categorising the inter-subgenre relationships and categorising the information which informs the delineation of those subgenres. This is a novel way of considering the classification of (Western art music) genres, and could be utilised to examine other knotty sets of genres.

Exploring the bibliographic classification of subgenres introduced some interesting ideas. Tangible discords with the domain are shown: the quantity of subgenres differs, as does the level of hierarchy represented by classes in some cases (both broader and narrower). These cannot be explained solely by the retrieval-focused nature of
bibliographic classification schemes. However, the findings can also be read as accordance between scientific and bibliographic classifications: the lack of coherence in the bibliographic scheme’s categorisation of opera subgenres could be seen as a reflection of the confused and unruly set of opera subgenres found in the music domain. This paper is a preliminary step in furthering understanding of Western art music genre classification, and so future research could see a similar analysis applied to other Western art music genres. Furthermore, it would be productive to see how the results from this paper fit into genre classification research pertaining to other music traditions. It would also be interesting to contemplate other sorts of artistic works using the two-plane model. Consequently, this paper illustrates how knowledge organisation can provide order to operatic chaos, and in the process, advance our understanding of music classification and knowledge organisation more generally.

Figure 1. The subgenre relationships for Märchenoper

Figure 2. Model of the classification of opera subgenres
References


