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The Soundtrack of Life
A Formal Alternative to Higher-Order Ontologies of Rock
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Painters Make Paintings and Sculptors Make Sculptures. What do Musicians Make?

Music can come in three forms:

Compositions

Performance

Recordings

Any one of these can be created in any genre, and no genre has exclusive claim to any form.

Higher-Order Ontology

asks the question: "what is the work in a given musical tradition?" Historically, there have been three traditions: classical, jazz, and rock. These are not exactly "genres", instead they are categories to break up the musical world into what kinds of work it produces.

In Classical, the work is compositions. In Jazz, the work is performance. Rock, though, seems to have reasonable claims to compositions, performances, and recorded tracks.

Monist and Pluralist Ontologies

Those who argue that rock has claim only to recorded tracks or some variation thereof as its works posit "monist" ontologies, where only a single work-type can belong to the tradition. Those who argue that rock can have multiple kinds of work argue for "pluralist" ontologies. They fear that monist ontologies miss something about rock when they claim that it can only be authentically experienced via a recording of it, not a live show or a written score.

Two Problems with Higher-Order Ontology

The Tradition-Overlap Problem

There seems to be no relevant difference between a classical composer and a rock songwriter other than genre. It seems to be most relevant that they share a form, so we should have language to accommodate that.

The Form/Genre Conflation Problem

When a musician says that are a "classical" musician, they are reporting on the genre of the music they make and are not being sensitive to form. If they were to be reporting on form, then they would need to additionally explain their genre, leaving open the possibility for "classical rock" meaning composers who work within the rock genre. Such a statement would be describing genre and form anyway, so the two categories are implicit in communication about music.

The Formal Ontology

Instead of working within traditions, we can acknowledge form and genre as ontologically distinct categories. I posit three forms: composition, performance, and recording. A composition is the written score, a performance is the live sound-event, and a recording is a repeatable track.