Cover Songs and Tradition: A Case Study of Symphonic Metal

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of cover songs in the continuation of tradition, and in the formation of a musical canon. It explores the connections between 'classical' and heavy metal music as expressed by musicians of said genres, specifically those who partake in both. Furthermore, I argue that the practice of covering works from the Western art music canon in the metal genre, evinces the consequent development of the symphonic metal sub-genre. An embedded investigation attests to Western art music having inspired numerous metal musicians, who have in turn *covered* said music as a means to show their respect for the tradition. As such, cover versions are essential to continue one tradition in a new direction. Ultimately, these cover versions of classical works liaise classical music and heavy metal, resulting in the formation of the symphonic metal tradition. Covering music also strengthens a musicians' position as authentic artists by demonstrating their belonging to two rites, and through their work of synthesizing grounds for the fusion of aforementioned rites. This research provides a further basis for examining the same phenomenon in other genres of music that demonstrate inter- and intra-generic links. It also provides a base for research into how rock and metal bands construct their own notions of tradition, canon, and authenticity through the music that they create and adapt.

Keywords

Cover songs, symphonic metal, Western Art Music, canon, authenticity

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Introduction

This paper examines symphonic metal through the practice of covering and its use of works of Western Art Music. In Western Art Music, a tradition has contributed to the development of a canon of works.¹ Similarly, various genres of music, including heavy metal, possess their respective canons resulting from traditions. These abstract collections of celebrated, seminal pieces of music define the aesthetics of their respective genres, representing the *authentic* within. The creation of new works must then appeal to the authentic canon, otherwise, risking being considered inauthentic for their lack of connection to the genre's tradition. Where Western art musicians may approach the authentic through 'historically informed performance' practice, heavy metal musicians take the practice of 'covering' songs of

¹ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 245–247.

another artist or songwriter as a means to posit their connections with the canon and past traditions.² With time, covering establishes a tradition per se while allowing it to continue to transform and revise the genre in which it functions.

In recent years, within the practice of covering pre-existing music of blues, hard rock, and iconic metal bands, metal musicians have sought to include the covering of traditional classical music. This, in turn, has contributed to the formation of the new sub-genre—symphonic metal. Several symphonic metal bands authenticate themselves through covering, displaying thorough knowledge of symphonic metal's lineage and tradition. However, the relatively loose construction of the canon poses challenges when authenticating new symphonic metal music as part of genre, making this a core issue for many musicians.³ This paper demonstrates how the practice of covering songs allows metal musicians to establish themselves within the symphonic metal genre. Subsequently, it elaborates on how metal covers of classical works connect the two genres, resulting in a mutual growth of the practice, and the metal genre.

² Ike Brunner, "Taken to the Extreme: Heavy Metal Cover Songs—The Impact of Genre" (Ph.D., Bowling Green State University, 2006), 1–2, 43–44. 'Covering' refers to the practice of one artist re-recording a song written by a different artist, typically that of a significant level. Often, there is some degree of re-arrangement that takes place, adapting the original song into the style of the new band, but this is not always the case. It is also worth noting that this practice is somewhat contradictory in the case of metal; if a band does nothing but cover the songs of another artist, they would be considered inauthentic. However, if a band makes no attempt to position themselves within the wider canon of metal through a practice like covering, they may be considered equally inauthentic.

³ Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 59–63.

Authenticity Through Cover Songs in Symphonic Metal

In metal genres, covering the songs of authentic bands is a means by which musicians and fans demonstrate their knowledge of ‘true metal,’ and validate themselves as genuine artists.⁴ A metalhead’s knowledge of real metal, along with their ability to reference it, works to found new music within a problematically defined genre.⁵ In other words, given the context of their extensive knowledge of metal repertoire, an artist’s inclusion or exclusion may be gauged through their use of the ‘invested cultural capital’ in their rendition of cover songs. A lack of familiarity with the tradition can result in several consequences. Firstly, a metal artist risks being called a ‘poseur’, or a ‘sell-out’.⁶ Secondly, and more importantly, they risk exclusion from the metal community. This is demonstrated in the sub-reddit, *shit the false say*, in which a redditor is mocked for being unfamiliar with Mercyful Fate [*sic*], a renowned heavy metal band and one of black metal’s earliest influences.⁷ This sub-reddit exists primarily to collect and mock statements about metal music considered inauthentic or ‘false’. In particular, the quotation below emphasizes the importance of being familiar with the ‘classics’. One user writes:

⁴ Brunner, “Taken to the Extreme”, 42–44; Fricke, Liner Notes for *Garage Inc.*

⁵ The term ‘metalhead’ is typically used to refer to serious fans of the genre, and thus can incorporate fans, musicians, and anyone involved in metal communities.

⁶ Jack Harrell, “The Poetics of Destruction: Death Metal Rock,” *Popular Music and Society* 18, no. 1 (1994): 91–103. A ‘poseur’ is one who pretends to know more than they actually do, rendering them inauthentic, while a ‘sell-out’ refers to an artist who compromises their artistic ideals for financial gains.

⁷ A redditor is a registered user who writes posts or comments on the website, Reddit. A ‘sub-reddit’ is a section of the site functioning as a communal thread. There are sub-reddits for many different topics and this paper will centre on those surrounding heavy metal music and culture.

“How can you call yourself a metalhead and not know Mercyful Fate... How can you call yourself a metalhead and not know/respect the classics?! *It's the one genre built entirely around understanding and appreciation of what came before...* the fact that you are saying what is and isn't metal, yet you don't know Mercyful Fate... I think that is what pisses me off most.” (Punctuation, and spelling original, italicized for emphasis)

Evidently, the argument over what does and does not constitute metal, and thus what is and is not authentic, is informed by a knowledge of metal bands.⁸ Members of the community go as far as to suggest that, if one is not familiar with the canon, then one has no right to call themselves a ‘metalhead’ or participate in this democratic metal community. As such, the quotation suggests that being unfamiliar with Mercyful Fate rescinds one’s right to decide what is or is not considered metal.

⁸ For examples of similar trends outside of online metal communities, consult Eric Smialek, "Genre and Expression in Extreme Metal Music Ca 1990–2015" (Ph.D., McGill University, 2015). Smialek discusses at length the ways in which metal fans deploy canons and genre taxonomies as a means to exclude fans of ‘abject genres’ such as nu-metal and metalcore by declaring them ‘not metal’.

Tradition and the Aesthetics of Metal

As symphonic metal musicians use the practice of covering to claim authenticity, it is crucial to consider how the musicians who belong to both metal and Western Art music traditions conceptualize their work. Symphonic metal musicians, such as Cristiano Trionfera, the guitarist and vocalist of Fleshgod Apocalypse, cite the importance of connecting music with its past.⁹ Trionfera states, “All we write and listen to comes in a way or another from the composers of the past and it’s all about taking the way of thinking about the music back to its origin.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Antinou Christos, guitarist and composer for the band septicflesh [*siɪ*], explains: “[septicflesh’s] music would not be the same if I had not studied [classical music] at the time.”¹¹ Other instances include Epica’s *The Classical Conspiracy*, whose first half consists almost entirely of covers of classical works. The work is described as showing that Epica “take[s] their classical music seriously”, yet never loses their “main ingredient of gothic metal.”¹² Significantly, neither genre in question is incorporated superficially; *these* bands are not typical metal bands incorporating a soprano for vocals, or a keyboard with a string orchestra patch. Rather, the musical and aesthetic elements of both genres are integral to the conception, writing, and development of symphonic

⁹ Cristiano Trionfera, “Fleshgod Apocalypse—Vocalist/Guitarist Cristiano Trionfera.” *Metal Rules*, Interview by Kirsty Birkett-Stubbs, January 27, 2012, <http://www.metal-rules.com/2012/01/27/fleshgod-apocalypse-vocalistguitarist-cristiano-trionfera/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Christos Antoniou, “Septicflesh—Interview with Christos Antoniou,” *Metal Rules*, Interview by Peter Atkinson, June 22, 2014, <http://www.metal-rules.com/2014/07/05/septicflesh-interview-with-christos-antoniou/>.

¹² Alex Henderson, “The Classical Conspiracy—Epica”, *Allmusic*, 2009, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/the-classical-conspiracy-mw0000817245>.

metal music. Symphonic metal musicians, like other metal musicians, conceive the direct connection between their music and its individual tradition, and intend to develop further within it.

Aesthetic, conceptual, and ideological links between traditions

Sonic power has always been a core aspect of the heavy metal aesthetic and is often achieved through loud dynamics and strident timbres —typically, through the use of distorted guitar at high-volume.¹³ However, it may be achieved through several other means. For example, power in the vocals is a defining characteristic of most metal bands, be it a pseudo-operatic sound of singers such as Bruce Dickinson and Rob Halford, or the screamed and growled vocals present in extreme metal genres.¹⁴ Symphonic metal bands reinterpret this concept by using classically-trained, female singers as a core part of their sound. The power of the voice that is essential for projection in large opera theatres readily supports the sonic power integral to metal music. By combining a female operatic singer with the distorted and/or amplified elements of metal music, these artists re-envision a traditional sonic power within symphonic metal. Further sonic power may be added with conventional metal vocals, such as growling or screaming. The inclusion of an orchestra or choir too can bolster this sonic power, while providing an alternate way of creating a 'wall of sound' to the techniques employed by other metal genres.¹⁵

¹³ Walser, *Running*, 2, 42–45.

¹⁴ Walser, *Running*, 2, 9.

¹⁵ Antoniou, “Septicflesh,” <http://www.metal-rules.com/2014/07/05/septicflesh-interview-with-christos-antoniou/>.

Thus, the classical-music archetype of the female soprano at the front of an orchestra or choir, intersects with the role of the archetypal front-man found in heavy metal music. Lastly, the *classical orchestra* joins in developing what constitutes sonic force for the purposes of a *symphonic metal band*.

As such, the aesthetic of power in metal music sees a paradigm shift; no longer do the ‘Spinal Tap stereotype’ of maximum power, volume, and distortion at all times remain the norm: The symphony orchestra’s dynamic and timbre are adapted in heavy metal. Broadly speaking, symphonic metal falls on the less-extreme side of metal-subgenres, in essence preserving the nuances of an orchestra which are not drowned out by typical death- or black-metal ferociousness; hence, a middle-ground between the aesthetics of heavy metal and Western Art music can be struck. The desire for power is not abandoned in symphonic metal, rather manipulated; when needed, the full range and sonic versatility of the orchestra is appropriated in the music. As such, the distorted and amplified band is combined with an orchestra and/or choir, and can have over one hundred members between them, fulfilling the traditional quota of sonic power of the metal genre. This is comparable to composers such as Berlioz and Wagner who increased the size and range of their orchestras, particularly in the bass register, in order to achieve a bigger, more complex, and more powerful sound.¹⁶

Histrionics are another aesthetic concern for symphonic metal, as metal and the related genre of ‘shock rock’ have always contained a theatrical element.¹⁷ Symphonic metal develops this by

¹⁶ *Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey*, directed by Sam Dunn, Jessica Joy-Wise, and Scot McFayden (2005; Toronto, Canada: Banger Productions, 2006), DVD.

¹⁷ Ian Christie, *Sound of The Beast* (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2003), 18–23.

appropriating elements from musical theatre, along with greater sizes and varieties of classical ensembles. This is evidenced through the increased length and complexity of bands' works, and through the ensembles with which they perform. Nightwish, for example, produced a 24-minute, 5-movement, through-composed piece on their most recent studio album *Endless Forms Most Beautiful*, with at least one work of comparable length and structure being included on the last five albums. Here, a full symphony orchestra and choir are commonly employed in addition to the metal band itself.

Cover songs are the means by which these bands codify such stylistic combinations, as can be seen in Epica's cover of the Presto from "Summer" of Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. The work provides an example of how a symphonic metal band can re-interpreted Western Art Music into the tradition of metal. The bands provide a new aesthetic through additional sonic power from the distorted guitar's characteristic timbre, expanding the texture of "Summer". However, the lead guitar defers to the first violin, allowing it act as soloist even in this new setting. This bears significance when compared to earlier classical covers by metal 'shred' guitarists in the 1980s.¹⁸ These guitarists would appropriate a classical composition for the conventional 4-piece instrumentation of a metal band, typically using the covers as an opportunity for the lead guitarist to demonstrate virtuosity. Thus, the aesthetics of the original work are largely lost along with the

¹⁸ See Walser, 57–107 for more information on these covers by guitarists. In all of Walser's examples of 1980s metal guitarists covering classical works, the lead guitarists assume the soloist role, often with deliberate reference to the status of solo violinists such as Paganini. This illustrates that there is not only a tradition within metal music of equating a lead guitarist with a classical soloist, but that it is usually the lead guitarist that assumes the central role when the two traditions meet at the expense of other instruments.

classical context of the composition. Conversely, Epica not only presented their cover of “Summer” alongside a full orchestra but left the soloist’s role to the violinist. In doing so, Epica achieves a balance between the typical role of a lead guitarist in a metal band and a soloist in an orchestra, preserving the aesthetics of the original work as a concerto.

Interviews with symphonic metal musicians emphasize their respect for the original contexts of the works and the intentions of their composers, and shed light on their distaste for a purely utilitarian application of classical music.^{19, 20} This is demonstrated in Therion’s cover of “Notung, Neidliches Schwert!” from Act 1 of *Siegfried* by Richard Wagner, performed live at the Miskolc International Opera Festival in 2007. In discussing the development of this event, the band stated:

"We wish to offer you a musical journey where the band both enters the classical world as humble guests, as well as inviting the classical players and singers into ou[r] world..."

There are several ways to incorporate opera and classical music with metal and rock music... Here, [we] tr[y] to show a great diversity by knowing what style and which rock instruments to play in each place, and (very important) when to be quiet and let the orchestra do their thing undisturbed, in which some dynamics between the two worlds can grow...

¹⁹ Christopher Johnsson, Liner Notes for *The Miskolc Experience*, Therion, Nuclear Blast, 2009, 2 Compact Discs and DVD.

²⁰ Luca Turilli, “Rhapsody—Luca Turilli,” *Metal Rules*, Interview by EvilG, 2000, <http://www.metal-rules.com/2005/08/28/rhapsody-luca-turilli/>.

While being an event with much of its focus on bringing classical music into rock and metal music, it is only fair to also make an attempt of the opposite...

We are here allowed to show how a band can make a respectful journey into the world of some of the most famous classical composers works. Many people would take for granted that the band must play 100% of the time and fight to uphold the status of the rock/metal elements. But I want to have the dynamics and life and interplay between the worlds and play where it makes sense and not just play something for the sake of having to play all the time and by that ruin both the composition and the effect of the band's presence."²¹

As evidenced in Therion's quotation, true collaboration in symphonic metal germinates from a desire to respect the classical tradition. The orchestra is supported by the band but is never overpowered; indeed, the main role of the band is to provide additional sonic power to its classical counterpart. Therion's choice of repertoire for this concert reinforces their beliefs; half of their set is covers of classical works and half is of their own music, giving each equal importance. This is significant in allowing the band and the orchestra to be perceived as equals in collaboration, which is not always the case in metal music. For example, Metallica's collaboration with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra is largely focused on Metallica—they are the draw for the audience,

²¹ Christopher Johnsson, *The Miskolc Experience*, Liner Notes.

their music is played, and the orchestra provides background score, supporting the ‘main event’ so to speak. As such, it is evident that the orchestra acts as support in other subgenres of metal music, while symphonic metal treats it as a key element of the genre. The result is that symphonic metal brings Wagner’s music unto recognition by metalheads as an equal to metal music.

The use of cover songs in symphonic metal

With the ideological, aesthetic, and musical connections between metal and classical traditions, I argue that covering songs cements and validates these connections within the framework of heavy metal. Heavy metal music develops its conceptions of cover songs from blues music practices, whereby it demonstrates a musician’s stylistic and musical inspirations, influences, and further authenticates the tradition.^{22, 23, 24} This practice was then extended to rock music, and then later to symphonic metal. An example is Nightwish’s cover of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera*, which demonstrates the influence of musical theatre in symphonic metal. In particular, this cover version prioritizes the aesthetic of metal music over that of musical theatre since much of the ‘orchestral’ material is produced from a synthesiser emulating a choir and a strings section, rather than Webber’s original, lavish orchestral setting. Nonetheless, the symphonic metal cover version retains the characteristically bombastic, theatrical style of musical theatre. As with the earlier examples, the retention of histrionics

²² Walser, *Running*, 57–58

²³ Gabriel Solis, “I Did It My Way: Rock and the Logic of Covers,” *Popular Music and Society* 33, no.3 (2010): 297–318, doi: [10.1080/03007760903523351](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760903523351).

²⁴ David Fricke, Liner Notes for *Garage Inc.*, Metallica, PolyGram, 1998, 2 Compact Discs.

intrinsic to musical theatre reinforces the importance of these elements within symphonic metal, lending perfectly to their amalgam. This duality is symbolised in this cover of ‘Phantom’ where Turunen, the classically trained opera singer sings a duet with Hietala, the self-taught metal vocalist. This balance is crucial to the discrimination of metal covers from symphonic metal covers; one that wholly adopts the metal aesthetic over the musical theatre aesthetic would be a return to the typical covering practice of metal bands, as opposed to an approach that fosters equality between the two traditions as described in this paper.

The covering of classical music, as it exists in symphonic metal today, is a rather recent development due to the unique position that musicians assume within the musical traditions of heavy metal and classical music, as well as the financial and social capital that they accrue in this position. A majority of symphonic metal musicians are intimately familiar with classical music—as its amateurs, listeners, in some cases composers, and almost always its *students*—and their backgrounds underscore their ‘habitus,’ informing their decisions when borrowing from the classical tradition. These musicians are not outsiders looking in on the classical tradition but rather, *belong to both traditions*; almost all of the singers considered here are classically trained, spending years studying and performing canonical art music repertoire. Many of the core songwriters for these bands have also formally studied music, even up to postgraduate levels, participating in the classical tradition as students, performers, and composers. Resultantly, these musicians are extremely familiar with classical music, as well as with the ideologies and aesthetics that they then appropriate into metal.

Today, when metal is no longer solely for the disenfranchised, powerless, working class, the social circumstances readily lend grounds for classical music's appropriation into metal. There now are well-educated, middle-class, metal musicians who have the resources, not only to study art music at a university or conservatorium, but also to employ a symphony orchestra when required—live, and in the studio. Naturally, compared to the already established bands, such resources may not be at newer symphonic metal bands' disposal as easily.²⁵ However, just as having a classical tradition habitus is crucial for symphonic metal musicians, belonging to the metal tradition is equally important if a band is to be considered authentic. Some, such as Holopainen, encountered classical music through study in their youth and encountered metal later.²⁶ Additionally, many bands have also covered works by influential metal bands (such as Nightwish's cover of Ozzy Osbourne's 'Crazy Train' and Fleshgod Apocalypse's cover of At the Gates' 'Blinded by Fear'), using these covers as a tool to cement their 'metal credentials'. It is this flexible habitus, derivative of two traditions, that equalizes their respective aesthetics in the realm of cover songs. As symphonic metal musicians belong equally to both traditions, they seek to represent their allegiances through covering. Ultimately, this practice of covering classical works emerges from an intention to utilize the invested cultural capital of one genre within the stylistic confines of another.

²⁵ Tommaso, Ricardi, "FLESHGOD APOCALYPSE—Interview with Tommaso Ricardi," *Metal Rules*, Interview by Peter Atkinson, August 23, 2013, <http://www.metal-rules.com/2013/08/23/fleshgod-apocalypse-interview-with-tommaso-riccardi/>.

²⁶ Tuomas Holopainen, "Band Members: Tuomas Holopainen," Nightwish, <http://nightwish.com/en/band/tuomas-holopainen>.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how cover versions serve as a means of linking oneself and one's work to an established body of canonical works, reinforcing the specific connections between classical music and metal. Core ideologies and aesthetics, such as authenticity and power, are maintained, whilst the ideological and aesthetic elements of the classical and metal traditions are merged and embodied in covering. Of new, a resultant canon is forming where symphonic metal bands' music is covered, beginning the cycle anew, as is the case with the band After Forever which has covered music by symphonic metal band Nightwish..²⁷ We can then expect to see the formation of a new symphonic metal tradition which owes its existence to the dual connection with the past traditions of classical music and heavy metal. How one enters this new tradition is of unimportance for as long as the artist pertains to, and has extensive knowledge of the seminal traditions. Although dwelling in a hybrid space, most bands primarily identify as metal bands, who reinterpret the objects of the classical tradition into the heavy metal tradition.

Although the focus has been on classical and metal music, this framework may apply to other traditions where cover songs exist as a link between traditions. Metal itself has certainly drawn on other genres outside of just classical music and its own history. As such, there is also the potential to use this framework as a basis for examining how metal bands construct notions of tradition, and further academic analysis of heavy metal music.

²⁷ R.W. Elliot, "After Forever," *Musical Discoveries*. June 13, 2004.
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