

MTH 5710.20
Tues-Thurs. 7-8:20
Music Bldg. Rm. 0041
Winter/Spring 2002

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Music, Culture and Ideas

This course critically surveys traditional and contemporary answers to two deceptively simple questions: *What is music?* and *Why does music matter?* Like large questions about the arts and culture generally, they are notoriously difficult to answer in a way that satisfies everyone. Since the days of the performance medium the ancient Greeks called *mousike*, Western philosophy and criticism have watched all sorts of grand claims about the essence music come and go. For example:

1. Music is a set of purely formal relations approaching the abstractness of mathematics;
2. Music is the expression of emotion;
3. Music is an expression of the experience of time;
4. Music expresses our nature as spiritual or moral beings
5. Music is a political act
6. Music is a pleasurable activity of the brain and body that performs different communicative roles in different cultures..

The list goes on. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the first five of these claims took on a new focus with the modern idea of the "musical work" as a distinct object, the modern secular institution of the concert, and the modern idea that music (with painting, sculpture, dance, literature, and architecture) is a *fine art* whose function is to afford *aesthetic experience* --a form of disinterested, pleasurable contemplation possessing value apart from religious, moral, political, or other "extra-aesthetic" purposes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these ideas became central to Enlightenment and Romantic aesthetic theories. In the twentieth century they culminated in cultural modernism, which portrayed each of the fine arts as an historically developing world of autonomous forms and values unto itself. In a way, aesthetic modernism provided the twentieth century, especially in the affluent and developed countries, with a secular religion, and it also fueled the debate, which of course continues today, over what, if anything, makes one artwork (or work of music) better than another.

But now critics generally agree that the heyday of modernism is over, which raises the inevitable question, What Next? A familiar answer is "Postmodernism," a many-faceted cultural sensibility that questions modernist conceptions of the purity of musical expression and emphasizes how music and other arts are all complex bearers of cultural meaning. Another approach to understanding music and the other arts that is on the rise now emphasizes, as in #6 above, how these are all activities with biological as well as social roots. The main goal of this course is to provide, through a variety of readings from musicologists, cultural critics, philosophers, cognitive scientists, and others, a working intellectual road map for understanding the above developments and applying these ideas to your own musical experience.

Required Texts

- (1) William Benzon, *Beethoven's Anvil: Music in Mind and Culture* (in bookstore)
- (2) Additional xeroxed packets, available at different points in the semester for a small charge in the Music Office.

Course Policies (read carefully) This course is primarily for MFA students in the Conservatory of Music . There are no special prerequisites for the course and it is not assumed even that everyone in the class has had a lot of experience reading and writing about abstract ideas. But it is assumed that anyone taking the course for credit will be prepared to make a serious effort to engage with our readings and participate in class discussion.

Attendance will be called regularly, and absences are excused only (1) in documented medical emergencies or (2) in cases where a student must perform elsewhere *as a requirement of their other music coursework*, in which case you need an explicit written note for that occasion from a supervising faculty member. Students with four or more unexcused absences are in danger of failing the course. Punctual arrival at the beginning of the class is a basic courtesy, as is refraining from eating and non-emergency bathroom trips during class.

Language problems? Any students who, because they are non-native English speakers or for any other reason, have difficulties with the readings are welcome to meet with me outside class. Students who encounter special difficulties completing the writing assignments are encouraged to work with tutors at the Learning Center.

Can I get a special exemption from having to attend classes because I have gigs, rehearsals, etc. on Tuesday and Thursday nights? I sympathize, but no. I know some class members may have such conflicts, but either you're in the class or you're not. Regular attendance is a requirement of all students taking the course for credit, and this policy—which is the Music Division's as well as my own-- will be applied evenly to all.

Written assignments will consist of one short two-page essay due the second week of class; two short (three typed, double spaced pages or more) essays on assigned topics at different points in the semester; and one slightly longer (five pages or more) essay at the end of the semester. There will be no in-class exams. Misrepresenting the work of another author as one's own (i.e., plagiarism) can result in failure of the course. (Don't hesitate to ask if you're unclear as to what counts as plagiarism.)

Language problems? Any students who, because they are non-native English speakers or for any other reason, have difficulties with the readings are welcome to meet with me outside class. Students who encounter special difficulties completing the writing assignments are encouraged to work with tutors at the Learning Center.

Can I be excused from classes because I have gigs, rehearsals, etc. on Tuesday and Thursday nights? Regular attendance is a requirement of all students taking the course for credit, and this policy—which is the Music Division's as well as my own-- will be applied evenly to all. Legitimate exceptions include concert or recital performances or dress rehearsals for such events; for these, please submit notes from the relevant supervising faculty.

Schedule of Readings and Discussions

Unless listed as recommended, all readings are required . Depending on the pace of our discussions, I may modify some dates. The readings aren't long in terms of pages; but you will probably find it helpful to read each selection at least twice to fully absorb the material. (See my handout "Reading Philosophy.") I encourage you to read widely beyond the required readings in our main texts and in other materials I'll place on reserve in the library as your time and interest permit. Two good all-purpose resources for further reading on topics related to this course are the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), which can be found in the library's reference room, and Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*, on reserve. **A note on written assignments:** Plenty of notice will be given in advance for each assignment and I may decide to alter some deadlines, but please take the deadlines seriously. A letter grade will be taken off for each day an assignment is late.

I. Introductory Themes

January

17 Introduction to course

22, 24 Provocations. Martha Bayles, Introduction to *Hole In Our Soul: The Loss Of Beauty and Meaning In American Popular Music* ; Roger Scruton, "The Eclipse of Listening"

Short paper assignment on the Bayles and Scruton Readings due in class 1/24.

II. Music as a Natural and Cultural Phenomenon

29 Music as a natural phenomenon: basics. Xeroxed articles: Patricia M. Gray, et. al., "The Music of Nature and the Nature of Music"; Mark Jude Tramo, "Music of the Hemispheres"

31 Music as natural *and* social. William Benzon, *Beethoven's Anvil: Music in Mind and Culture*, chapter I ("Some Varieties of Musical Experience")

February

5 Benzon, chapter II ("Music and Coupling")

There will be a short in-class writing assignment on February 5. You will be asked to write one page (or more if you like) on any theme in the Benzon book you wish. These will be given check-marks, not letter grades.

7 Benzon, chapter III ("Fireflies: Dynamics and Brain States"), the essential pages are 47-51; 67-8

12, 14 Benzon, chapter IV ("Musical Consciousness and Pleasure")

Second short paper topic (on musical pleasure and musical value) distributed February 14 .

19, 21 Interlude: The Puzzle of Musical Value. Leonard B. Meyer, "Some Remarks on Value and Greatness in Music" (chapter II of *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*); Simon Frith, excerpt from *Performing Rites : On the Value of Popular Music*

26 Music, neurobiology, and emotion. Benzon, chapter V ("Blues in the Night: Emotion in Music")

28 Towards a neurology of rhythm. Benzon, chapter VI ("Rhythm Methods: Patterns of Construction")

March

5 Music's evolutionary significance: "auditory cheesecake" or survival tool? Steven Pinker, excerpt from *How The Mind Works*; Geoffrey Miller, excerpt from *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*

Second short paper due by the end of the day in my office Wednesday, March 6.

7 Music's evolutionary significance (cont): Benzon, chapter VIII (The Protohuman Rhythm Band")

12, 14 Spring break; no class

19 The Four Ages of Music. Benzon, chapter X, "Music and Civilization"

III. Romanticism, Formalism, and Modernism

21, 26 Essentials of Romantic Musical Aesthetics. Joseph Kerman and Gary Tomlinson, "Music After Beethoven: Romanticism", Edward Lippman, "Romantic Aesthetics" (chapter 8 of Edward Lippman, *A History of Western Musical Aesthetics*)

Third short paper topic (on the romanticism and formalism readings) distributed March 26.

28 Passover; no class

April

2 The sublime. Edward Rothstein, "Contemplating the Sublime"

4 Musical formalism. Edward Lippman, "Formalism and Autonomy" (xerox; chapter 10 of *A History of Western Musical Aesthetics*); Excerpt from Eduard Hanslick, *On the Beautiful in Music*

9 Joseph Kerman and Gary Tomlinson, "Music and Modernism"; Martha Bayles, "The Three Strains of Modernism"

11 no class. (work on short papers.)

IV. Music, Politics, and Postmodernity

Third short paper due in class April 16.

16, Theodor Adorno, "The Social Situation of Music" and "The Perennial Fashion--Jazz"
Recommended: Wayne Bowman, "Music as Social and Political Force," (chapter 7 of *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*) esp. pp. 304-34; on reserve.

18 Critique of Adorno. Wayne Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* 330-34.

23 Jonathan D Kramer, "The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism"

25, 30 Gender and musical pluralism. Renee Lorraine, "A History of Music"; Wayne Bowman, "Contemporary Pluralist Perspectives" (chapter 8 of *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*)

May

2 Leonard B. Meyer, "Postlude" to Music, *The Arts, and Ideas*

7 A musical utopia? Attali on “composition”. Excerpt from Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

Final Papers due in my office no later than the end of the day Friday May 17.