

Teaching Reflection

Fall 2017

MUCB 201: Music History I, Early Music

In Music History I in fall 2017, I devoted considerable energy to finding enjoyable ways of involving the entire class while helping them assimilate course content—many of these were things I first tried in fall 2016 and then tweaked to make more successful or streamlined in this second iteration of the course. I kept the activity of the “Crane Convent,” for example, as a means of helping students assimilate the rationale and pacing of the Divine Office. Each student was assigned the persona of a medieval nun—I gleaned the names from a medieval manuscript—and given a specific task to do around the convent. This helped emphasize the homosocial but intensely hierarchical structure of convents and underscore the self-sufficient nature of these medieval communities. At the same time, other students were assigned the task of “bell-ringer” and “time-keeper,” announcing to all of us “nuns” the various hours of the Office. I thought this activity did a good job of helping the students understand in a personal way the cyclical nature of religious devotion in a medieval convent. It necessitated the involvement of the entire class—no one was a bystander. I also gave the students extra resources to help foster interest, such as DJ mixes incorporating medieval music samples or links to the intersection of popular culture & early music.

At several points in the semester I paused to emphasize the biases, exclusions, and Eurocentrism which underscore music history narratives. Like in the previous year, we began the semester by reading and discussing a blog post entitled “If History is Written by the Victors,” and I assigned them lengthier readings on Hildegard and nuns in early 1600s rather than the short sections in the textbooks. I’d like to continue to expand these initiatives gradually in subsequent semesters. As I return to teaching Music History I, I’ll continue to expand the curriculum by including more women, people of color, and non-European musicians and styles.

One of the biggest changes I made was to the final project; while I still had them create a concert program and program notes, I changed the focus to a more specific organizing principle. I asked students to choose a single event in history during our class time frame. (This could be a wedding celebration, a battle, an important event such as consecration of a church, celebration of a particular saint’s day during a certain year, assumption to the throne of a particular monarch, launching of a voyage of discovery/conquest, prayer of mourning or thanksgiving for a natural disaster, etc—but it had to be a specific time and place). The students were asked to put together a concert program of approximately 1 hour to 1 hour and 20 minutes worth of music relating to this chosen event. The music needed to be chronologically, geographically, and stylistically appropriate (such as a Mass of Thanksgiving for deliverance from plague deaths, not saucy love songs). While much of the research was the same as last year after this point, I think the focused event was really fun (and I had a few students get very involved in memes related to their events). However, some students picked events that were extremely hard to research or find enough extant music to fill out their

programs. I think creating a list of several events that they must choose from would probably ease this particular problem.

MUCH 495: Music, Power, and Politics, post-1945

In fall 2017, I developed an entirely new upper-division course, “Music, Power, and Politics, post-1945.” While the politics of popular music is obviously very important, I deliberately focused this class on art music, as it is critical for us to talk about how concert musics are not “above” politics or “apolitical” (stances which have often been uttered by artists, performers, and audiences). I likewise chose the chronological emphasis deliberately, as these post-1945 repertoires are often underserved by the core music history courses due to the inevitable time crunch at the end of Music History III. Moreover, while all music is political in some way, asking students to think carefully about the nature of power and politics in the 20th century offered a much nicer framework and guiding principle to the class than a survey of 20th century styles.

In “Music, Power, and Politics,” we spanned musics from the era of World War II through pieces related to 9/11—basically from music in concentration camps and the *Quartet for the End of Time* to the use of music as a means of torture by the CIA after 9/11 and John Adams’s *On the Transmigration of Souls*. I was truly impressed by the willingness and enthusiasm of the students in this course as we tackled very difficult subject matter ranging from violence to totalitarianism to the use of music as torture to music’s role in political movements such as anti-war protests, feminism, AIDS activism, and anti-colonialism. [And the class was at 8am, really a very difficult set of topics to plunge into first thing in the morning]. I was very fortunate to have a terrific group of students in this seminar, several of whom produced outstanding term projects, including studies of the music used in Holocaust museums, the racial politics in Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures*, and the interconnections of race and marketing in Dave Brubeck’s music.

This was a very new course design for me, and I gained a great deal from the readings and ideas I encountered while working on it. While the overall course design was seminar-style and the grading framework similar to my other upper division courses, I took care to have the students do a lot of collaborative work (sometimes at the board, sometimes via other modes) to work through large-scale writings as a class. They dug in with enthusiasm and I think the approach worked very well. I didn’t have a lot of things that felt particularly off-kilter in terms of this class, but I’d like to revisit the particular topics I chose and see if anything would be useful to add or subtract. I also think this would be a good class for which to create a specifically graduate version.