

Teaching Reflection

Fall 2018

MUCB 323: Music History III, Music Since 1900

On the first day of this class, I asked the students to spend a few minutes free-writing about pieces/compositions/composers they knew from the 20th and 21st centuries, including pieces they had played as solo rep or with a large ensemble. They also answered directed questions about debates/controversies of the century, and finally how *they* might organize a class called “Music since 1900.” I collected these pieces of paper, returning them to students on the day of the final—a small thing, but one which allowed each of them some tangible feeling of the progress they had made during the course.

In both of my courses this semester, I took care to incorporate new/contemporary publications and materials. For Music History III, we began the first week of the semester by reading Alex Ross’s *New Yorker* essay “The Sounds of Music in the Twenty-First Century,” (published the same week as the beginning of the semester, August 2018). We spent the second day of class parsing this piece, with students reflecting on the entirety of the 20th and 21st century from the position of today; this allowed us to begin our semester by considering how the cataclysms of the 20th century continue to shape our position and opinions in 2018.

There were a couple of other approaches/pedagogical tools that I thought worked particularly well for the students, each involving experiential learning. To give three examples: during the section on Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, I had them attempt a few of the more unorthodox steps from Nijinsky’s choreography, asking them to think (with their own bodies) about how movements can be just as transgressive as sounds. For our unit on John Cage, each section recorded “4’33” during class, which I then uploaded using an app distributed by the Cage Foundation (which geotags performances of this piece from all over the world—ours were the first from Potsdam).¹ Finally, near the end of class we collectively engaged in one of Pauline Olivero’s *Sonic Meditations*, a meditative listening practice. I received a number of comments from students on evaluations that they particularly remembered and enjoyed these moments in class.

In terms of course design and philosophy, much of this course reiterated approaches from my Music History I and II courses, including Moodle and in-class quizzes, attendance and participation, short writing assignments, exams, and a final research project. For this course’s final project, I asked the students to choose a topic that dealt in some way with the topic of music and migration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While this topic was broad enough to allow many different approaches, it was unabashedly intended to help them think about the ways music has always moved across borders and been tied with migration and movement. In addition to asking for a bibliography, I required students to submit a podcast in

¹ For more on this app, see: https://www.johncage.org/4_33.html

the midst of the project, where they provided a 6-10 minute recording on how their case study related to music and migration (including an audio example). While a few students were a bit nervous about the podcast initially, they turned out amazingly well, including some that were truly wonderful. I'll definitely do this again, but perhaps a little earlier in the semester to allow me more time to grade them.

Overall, I thought this class went very well—I really enjoyed teaching it, and as this was the first time I've taught Music History III, I was quite happy with how much of this vast amount of material we managed to cover in a semester (we made it to about the year 2000). I would, however, like to spend some time brainstorming ways of blending a chronological and thematic approach with this course. The biggest struggle I had (and one which several students commented on in evaluations) related to preparing students for exams. While I always offer optional review sheets and optional review sessions, there were a couple of instances (notably the final exam) where due to time pressures, I had to circulate the review sheet less than the normal week-in-advance. I don't consider this to be a particularly significant problem (the review sheets are optional, not required), but now that I have taught this course and designed my exams, it will be easier for me to continue to offer those services to students on the typical timetable.

MUCH 495: Opera in the 20th and 21st Centuries

As in Music History III, I wanted to begin this course with a recent publication. In the 20th and 21st century opera class, I had the students begin the semester by reading the introduction to Naomi André's newly published monograph *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. We spent the first day of class discussion covering not the beginnings of opera at the turn of the century, but how we deal *today* with the legacies of our operatic past—such as blackface in *Otello* or Leontyne Price's seminal appearances as a woman of color singing the title role in *Aida*—and how those debates should shape both our understandings of operatic history and our engagements with those canonic works today. It was a really powerful discussion—including some personal testimony from students about race, ethnicity, religion—that I felt set us on the right foot of critical thinking and debate for the rest of the semester.² Later in the semester, we had an online and in-class discussion about staging problematic works such as *Don Giovanni* in the era of #MeToo, and the students similarly had a lot to say and work through on this topic.³

Much of the class was relatively similar in content and design to how I taught this course in Spring 2017, with the following exceptions:⁴ I redesigned some of the final research project. While still a series of scaffolded steps, I reorganized the due dates and had students sometimes

² André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Evanston: University of Illinois Press, May 2018).

³ <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2017/12/holding-don-giovanni-accountable.html>

⁴ See teaching reflection from Spring 2017 for explanation of course design and examples of assignments.

submit several pieces of the project at once. While upper division students are wonderful, in my experience many do have problems with deadlines and turning in assignments on time, so streamlining the number of due dates they needed to remember seemed to help alleviate this problem a bit.

As another adjustment, I taught this class twice a week instead of 3 meetings, therefore I redistributed some of the screening and discussion into both Tuesday and Thursday meetings. One major change that helped initiate, streamline, and enhance overall discussion in this course was that I required all students to participate in online discussion forums on Moodle before coming to class (students were generally required to participate about ten times throughout the semester). These forums were really successful, and I was very pleased with how they primed our discussions on articles and issues before we even stepped into the classroom. I think this will become my normal method of functioning in upper division classes.

One special element of this semester's course involved our opportunity to participate in the genesis and performance of the Pelliocciotti prize-winning opera, Tom Cipullo's *Mayo*. The world premiere in November 2018 of this opera is a major reason I wanted to run "Opera in the 20th and 21st Centuries" this semester. I arranged for all students to attend the morning educational outreach performance of *Mayo*. After the performance, students wrote a reflection essay; this was a wonderful opportunity not just to attend an opera, but to use class time to reflect on the issues of contemporary opera. Students also attended the *Met: Live in HD* transmission of Nico Muhly's *Marnie* in November, which we likewise discussed in class.

A final change that I made in this class was to change the title and focus from "20th Century Opera" to "Opera in the 20th and 21st Centuries," hoping to drag our discussion of contemporary opera more firmly into this century. While cutting content is always a little painful, I added a full week on 21st century operas, with subjects on trauma in opera (including operas about slavery in the United States) and operatic reflections on contemporary crises (Chaya Czernowin's *Zaïde/Adama* and Du Yun's *Angel's Bone*). This was really fun for me to continue my own research and knowledge of these recent works, and I'd like to include shifting the focus to include more 21st century opera.