

Teaching Reflection

Fall 2019

MUCB 323: Music History III, Music Since 1900

This is the third semester in a row that I've taught this course, and I feel like it's really starting to become clearer to me as a course—both in terms of the places of stress and the places of success. Each time I continue to make significant changes in higher-level takeaways for students, the structure of the course, and specific content. I'm continuing to start the class out with Alex Ross's 2018 *New Yorker* essay "The Sounds of Music in the Twenty-First Century," which I think does a really nice job of starting us in the *now* and reflecting on the scope of the 20th century as well. I've also added a few works, framing devices, and topics which ground discussions about 20th and 21st century music in theories about race, gender & sexuality, class, exoticism, colonialism, authorial intent, and the changing role of performance.

One major logistical annoyance this semester was Norton's introduction of new editions of both the textbook and the anthology. I certainly didn't want to force students to purchase more expensive books unnecessarily—and many of them had already made arrangements to share or borrow or purchase books from classmates who took the class in the spring anyway. So I in essence was working out of two editions of the textbook and anthologies at all times, which meant that I had to post (and clearly delineate) two sets of page numbers, scan works that were in one volume and not in another, etc. It's a minor quibble—and I certainly wanted the widest and cheapest access for students possible—but it did eat up quite a lot of my time this semester. I continue to wonder whether the survey would be better served by Norton period-specific textbooks, but that seems to mean a higher price-point; it's a tricky discussion but perhaps one we ought to continue as an area.

The good news is that the new anthology contains a decent amount of new repertoire, which allowed me to incorporate more post-1940s jazz, more women composers, and more 21st century repertoire. (see reappointment dossier for slides and handouts about border crossings). One of the best new additions to the anthology was Caroline Shaw's Pulitzer-prize winning *Partita*. Not only is this a 21st century work by a young woman composer, it's also a great composition that really draws the students in—in a wonderful moment, a big group of them were singing it when I came into the final exam. But it is also a piece with controversies surrounding it. I had recently read a wonderful, accessible essay by Indigenous composer Brent Michael Davids about cultural appropriation and this work. I had the students read the piece, used some in-class time about how to approach discussions about cultural appropriation. I think the work and the essay went together very well, and I'll certainly do this again in the future.

I continued to mix a variety of different kinds of assessment; quizzes, in-class participation, exams, and the continued final research assignment on music & migration. I still really like this final assignment as a means of prodding the students to think more about music's fluidities and boundary-crossing abilities rather than its stasis or exclusions. I think in the future I may want to push students to pick topics that more intentionally deal with underrepresented groups, however; I do want to reflect on whether I'd like to change the final project in some major or minor fashion.

In terms of student feedback on this course, overall I was really happy with how the students felt at the end of the semester. I received very positive feedback in general, with a lot of commentary on enjoying the course, having learned a lot, opinions that the lecture components were engaging. Students continued to call

out specific things that they enjoyed, including: the Oliveros exercise, the Shaw discussion, the Ross reading, the embodied exercises with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, etc. Sometimes there was some dissatisfaction with how quickly I graded exams; I understand that, but am not sure how to best address that issue given the workload. Some semesters are better than others in terms of the number of students, how things shake out over the course of the semester. It's something I do consider every term, but I still don't think there's a perfect solution in terms of giving students work, giving them feedback, and doing so quickly and competently when you have ninety individuals in the course of a semester. I'm continuing to reflect on how to maintain quality of instruction and increase speed of feedback (in a manageable humane way)—it's a tricky balancing act.

MUCH 495: Music & Disability Studies

This was a newly-designed upper-division seminar which I taught for the first time this fall. I've been very much hoping to develop a course on this subject for several semesters, so I took the time this summer to finally develop this version. In addition to my own research in the area, I consulted with several friends who have taught music & disability studies courses of their own, and also took advantage of the wonderful resources through the American Musicological Society Disability Studies Group.

Disability Studies—there is now a disability studies minor at SUNY Potsdam—is a new interdisciplinary area which studies the cultural dimensions of disability across different chronological eras, places, and cultures. Disability studies in *music* is an extremely recent field, only emerging after about 2006. As both a human condition and as a type of identity, disability is shaped by changing perceptions constructed by cultural ideas (from the social to the political). In MUCH 495: Music and Disability Studies, the students learned to employ the interdisciplinary approaches of disability studies to examine social and cultural aspects of disability in relation to music. Through readings in a variety of disciplines (such as musicology, cultural studies, and disability studies), they explored the ways musicians have identified as disabled, as well as how disability has shaped music and reception. Students likewise explored how disability narratives have been used in discourse about musical style. Listening, viewing, and analysis form part of class assignments, as does a final research podcast on the topic of music and disability.

This course was designed as a typical upper-division undergraduate seminar; students completed readings and listening assignments, posted commentary on Moodle and served as discussion leaders, and completed a final research podcast. The course design was roughly chronological and primarily Western in focus, although we devoted a great deal of time to both popular and art musics. We moved from the Middle Ages through the early 21st century (ending with a discussion of hip hop and disability). See the reappointment dossier course schedule for a more comprehensive list of topics. As is often the case with new seminars, this was a heavy lift since I was often teaching readings for the first time, but it was thoroughly enjoyable to “be on my toes” and learn such an immense amount of new material along with the students. There were a number of students who identified as having a disability in the class, which lent our discussions special immediacy and relevancy. The final podcast projects included some amazing work, such as a discussion of Porgy's disability in *Porgy and Bess*, impairment and accommodation in the playing style of Django Reinhardt, the “inspiration porn” of disabled contestants on reality singing competitions such as *American Idol*, and the connections between slavery, embodiment, disability, and liberation in *cumbia*. It was really an amazing final day of term when everyone sat down to hear their peers' project details.

This was a wonderful group of students; I couldn't have asked for a better cohort to teach in this first iteration of the course. They had a variety of different specializations and interests, they challenged each other in respectful and thoughtful ways, and I learned so *much* alongside them in teaching this course. The feedback

on the evaluations was uniformly positive—I think the students were incredibly grateful to have the chance to discuss these issues in a music history class. Among the words which commonly recurred in student evaluations were “useful, thought-provoking, relevant, important, enlightening, informative,” or even “made me see things in a different light.” I think the course is providing an important corollary to work in music & special education; I hope to partner with colleagues inside the music department and across campus to do more collaborative work in the area of music & disability studies in the future. I hope to offer this course regularly, perhaps every year.