

Teaching Reflection II

Fall 2020

MUCB 323: Music History III, Music Since 1900

This is the fifth semester in a row that I've taught this course, and each time I continue to make significant changes in higher-level takeaways for students, the structure of the course, and specific content. One priority I continually emphasize is a focus on *today's* music (see Fall 2018 and spring 2020 teaching reflections for explanation of the *Listen Wider* project and Alex Ross's 2018 *New Yorker* essay "The Sounds of Music in the Twenty-First Century"). This is essential in the only part of the history sequence which gets longer every year! Throughout these five semesters, I have also consistently stressed the importance of critiquing the musical canon and have worked to 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. I have also expanded my incorporation of works by women, composers of color, and other underrepresented groups each semester.

However, given the unique contingencies of this fall, I decided to streamline certain aspects of this course, both to emphasize specific priorities and to avoid overloading the students. I forced myself to *only* assign 3-5 pieces every week. Within that limitation, I brainstormed overarching organizing themes for each week and strictly abided by the principle that each week's 3-5 pieces should *at minimum* include one piece by a woman composer and one piece by a BIPOC composer. This specific framework yielded the most diverse repertoire I've taught in this course to date (see "course schedule" in appointment dossier for specifics). I therefore taught quite a bit of content new to me this semester, not just works by artists I already tended to incorporate—such as Nadia Boulanger or Florence Price—but composers such as José White Lafitte, Manuel Ponce, May Frances Aufderheide, Ethel Smyth, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and quite a few others. I thought this kind of framework worked really well, and made questions about representation a quintessential focus *throughout* the semester.

Having trialed the organizational approach in the spring, I settled on structuring this fall's virtual class into two asynchronous days (Mon/Wed) and one synchronous meeting (Fri). On Mondays the students were assigned asynchronous reading and listening, with subsequent quiz questions; on Wednesdays I recorded a lecture that they could view at any time and then subsequently enforce with quiz questions; on Fridays we met to discuss, incorporate further listening, and work on other activities to expand our knowledge of the week. In these Friday sessions, Zoom was immensely helpful, since I could quickly and easily have the entire class contribute a comment on a specific issue. This actually works better than in-person because I can get input from everyone quite quickly and can ask a variety of types of questions. In terms of evaluation, I set up all of my quizzes and exams as open-book, untimed exams: I found this to be a great approach in terms of lessening student anxiety and eliminating the need for certain kinds of accommodations. In my opinion, these exams are also more illuminating—I can focus less on mitigating anxiety and helping with memorization problems and more on comprehension and nuance. In lieu of a "final research paper," I had the students complete a final essay project on "Music in 2020." Each picked a specific topic within the areas of music performance, music education, music business, music therapy, composition, or other. Within their topic, they had to discuss some aspect of how their particular topic was impacted by the pandemic. Many of these essays were wonderful and poignant, and the students did a wonderful job connecting their own areas of specialization with analysis of contemporary issues.

The semester did have some downsides. The amount of time to set up and grade exams was immense. Even though Moodle's interface works quite well—even for audio examples—it often took me in the realm of four to five hours to completely upload my exam for both sections (this did not include time to write the exam). Similarly, making a one-hour lecture video often took me the better part of a day. Easily the biggest time problem for videos had to do with video captions. I had several students who needed accommodations due to hearing impairments, so getting this right was really critical. While the Relay interface and captioning *functions* decently, this is a class with a number of technical terms and non-English names: so I always had to go back and heavily edit the captions to make them legible. This was *hugely* time consuming. While I don't have a good workaround solution for the moment—and clearly the impetus behind the captions is critically important—this was really the biggest problem of the semester as editing the captions took tons of time away from other work.

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 on the structure and design of the asynchronous/synchronous mix and appreciated that many students complimented the way I had designed the course for virtual delivery. Many likewise noted they found the structure, expectations, and delivery of the course very clear.

The exams in general worked well for students—almost everyone who spoke about them reported on feeling less anxiety, and I think the work they produced was better. A few issues remain: I feel that the lack of studying (since the exams are open book and untimed) is a fair exchange for a test that may take longer than a typical in-class exam. Quite a few students still reported that these exams were long, however. Moving forward, I may alter a few things about the tests (removing questions, or splitting the work somehow), but I think some of this may be about continuing to tweak my communication about these exams. Judging by the timings on Moodle, certainly some of the students were able to complete the exams in an hour, and I gave them the short responses ahead of time.

In terms of mental health, it was really amazing to see so many positive comments on the evaluations related to how the students felt in the class. I did spend a lot of time thinking about the best ways to offer needed time accommodations and support for the many difficulties students were undergoing during the semester. It was wonderful to hear that seemed to have registered with many students.

Finally, in relation to my focus on incorporating diverse repertoire, I found the vast majority of students explicitly mentioned this as a strongly positive aspect of the course. Many commented positively on learning about underrepresented groups, enjoyed the socio-political aspects of the course, and appreciated the move into contemporary repertoires as well. I did have one or two students who were clearly upset that we did not spend more time on wind ensemble repertoire. This is a critique I take seriously—musicology has notorious myopias in certain areas, and wind ensemble pieces are definitely among types of lit underrepresented in musicological literature. I have incorporated more wind ensemble literature into this course in the past; I didn't do as much this semester, displacing some pieces for other choices. That may be something I'll revisit in the future. With that said, I completely disagree that my job as a music history professor is to teach "historically important music" (according to who??), and I don't feel that composers like Holst are underserved by Crane's curriculum overall. As always with this course, there's a difficult balancing act in deciding what to include in 15 weeks. There's not only a huge variety of styles and approaches to touch on, but also an imperative to critique entrenched ideas about "musical worth" and "importance" that continue to do damage to underrepresented groups. I'm generally happy with how this course engages in dialogue on this issue, but as always am continuing to reflect on this question.