

Teaching Reflection III

Fall 2020

MUCH 495: Music and Disability Studies

The first time I offered this course was in Fall 2019, with the hope I could teach it regularly as an upper division music history elective with potential crossover to both the special ed concentration at Crane and the new disability studies minor at SUNY Potsdam. Disability Studies is a new interdisciplinary area studying the cultural dimensions of disability across different chronological eras, places, and cultures. Disability studies in music is particularly new, only emerging after 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 “Music & Disability Studies,” we focused on interdisciplinary approaches of disability studies to examine social and cultural aspects of disability in relation to music. We explored the ways musicians have identified as disabled, how disability has shaped music and reception, and how disability narratives have been used in discourse about musical style. I was immensely proud to offer this course to Crane students—I think it is a very important area to discuss, for both educators and performers—and I was happy to have this syllabus listed as containing “diversity rich content” through DIAC. In changing this course from its initial offering, I made changes in both content and in structure (particularly due to the pandemic). Among the content I was happiest to have incorporated in this Fall 2020 iteration was a new reading connecting disability and gender studies through the case study of composer Ethel Smyth and her conceptions of her loss of hearing. In addition, our work on the AIDS pandemic—in the midst of our own international pandemic—brought new resonance to that discussion this fall.

Having trialed the organizational approach in the spring for an upper division seminar, I settled on structuring this fall’s virtual class into one asynchronous day (Tuesday) and one synchronous meeting (Thursday). On Tuesday the students were assigned asynchronous reading and listening and asked to provide a Moodle forum post reflecting on their work; on Thursdays we met to discuss and work on other activities to expand our knowledge of the week. In these Thursday sessions, I typically had a few lecture pieces and some things I wanted to specifically contribute to the discussion, but I would typically put students into breakout rooms for at least ten minutes to interact with each other about their responses to their readings. I used different breakout rooms each class to make sure they had the chance to work with different peers throughout the semester. The forum posts were amazing—it gave me such wonderful feelings to see some of the things the students would write as they pondered these readings. I was so happy with how they primed our discussions on articles and issues before we ever “stepped into the classroom.” Given the unique contingencies of this fall, I streamlined some of the content covered in my initial version of this class, since we were in essence focusing on 1-2 readings a week rather than 3-4. Curtailing the content had no negative impact; rather, it allowed us to dive deeper and focus our efforts and discussions. Overall, I think this course worked really well in the virtual format in Fall 2020.

In lieu of a “final research paper,” I had the students complete a final research podcast on some aspect of music and disability. The scaffolded final research podcast began with individual meetings, progressing through research statements, bibliographies, abstracts, partial drafts, peer feedback, presentations, and final podcasts. The completed podcasts were terrific, with a wide-ranging set of subjects from classroom music and disabilities to representation of disabled operatic characters to analyses of the problematic intersections of disability, race, and mental health in the case of Billie Holiday. I really value helping the students learn to give

good peer feedback to each other; we spend some time talking on *how* to do it, and I think it's an invaluable skill for all to learn in college. Yet this part of the project is always a little tricky, since inevitably one or two people in any given class will have a partner who—for a variety of reasons—doesn't submit their project on time. It's hard to figure out the best way to do partner work that doesn't disadvantage folks when their partner goes missing. I'm still thinking about this, but hesitant to completely cut out peer feedback.

Turning to the feedback from the student evaluations, everyone seemed to think the course was fair and well-designed. Several commented positively on the mix of synchronous and asynchronous and small group and large group work (though one student disliked breakout rooms and would prefer the larger-group discussions). I loved that one of the students commented specifically on the small ice-breaker activities at the beginning of class, praising "opportunities to be social in a setting that is absolutely unforgiving to socializing." In general, I was so heartened—as with last time I taught this class—with how meaningful students tended to find the content. As an example, one student noted: "This course was extremely eye-opening and I believe that every Crane student should take this course because the only other course in Crane that talks about music and disability is Music and Special Education. I personally feel that there should be more courses like this one offered at Crane....Dr. Brooks makes us think and question everything which is so important because most of us did not learn to examine history in this way." Clearly there was a lot for us all to process this semester, but I loved teaching this class and the students in it were often the highlight of my week.

In terms of mental health, a number of students in this particular class had extraordinarily difficult things to deal with this semester, including a number of COVID infections among friends and family and students in the class. I was happy that so many of them reached out and we had the chance to talk, but I was sorry there was such a need for mental health support. It was heart-warming to read some of the feedback from students who reported that they felt very supported and cared-for during this really difficult semester.