

Teaching Reflection

Spring 2019

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 this course, 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 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

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

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. When I taught the course the second time in Spring 2019, I used much the same approach, but continued to experiment with changing deadlines and timing, with more success on timelines for exams. When I teach the course again in Fall 2019, I may work to see if there is a way towards a better balance of thematic and chronological approaches.

MUCH 495: Music, Gender, & Sexuality

In Spring 2019, I taught an upper division course on "Music, Gender, and Sexuality." This is the second time I've taught this seminar here, and I have offered various versions of this class at three other institutions prior to coming to SUNY Potsdam. The course is divided into two parts: art musics from the Middle Ages through the 19th century prior to the midterm, then topics from 20th and 21st-century American popular music for the rest of the semester. I mostly taught the same topics as I did in spring 2018—ranging from Hildegard to constructions of masculinity and virtuosity to Led Zeppelin to Motown and girls' groups to Beyoncé to many others—and the class also benefited from a visit from Shelly Tramposh, who presented some of her work on Rebecca Clarke. My sense is that the music majors enrolled in the case very much appreciated the opportunity to dig into topics rarely covered in music history surveys, both in terms of critical questions about gender and sexuality, and in terms of popular music repertoires—comments on evaluations tended to be very positive.

Much of the class was relatively similar in design to other upper division courses I've taught, with a midterm and a scaffolded final research project. As in my other upper division courses, 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 in addition to serving as discussion leader twice a semester). These forums continue to be really valuable—I was very pleased with how they primed our discussions on articles and issues before we stepped into the classroom.

One of the main changes I made this semester was to omit the final presentations during the last week of class or finals week—I find these always tend to run over time and rarely offer particularly useful additions to their written work. Instead, I assigned students a partner. They had to listen to their partner's podcast and read the abstract of the final paper; during the final exam time, we spent one hour going through brief presentations on the partner's work—I found the students were very thoughtful and thorough in presenting their partner's work to the class. We spent the second hour of the final exam time summarizing major issues and debates from the course, which felt very satisfying as a way of pulling together our work during the semester. This was, in my opinion, much more successful than a series of rushed presentations, and I'd like to do similar things in the future.

This class is cross-listed through Women & Gender Studies students, but tends to fill up with Crane students very quickly—I'd like to explore ways to attract more non-major students in future semesters. In partnership with Dr. Erica Levenson, the two of us have decided to each offer an upper-division seminar on "Music, Gender, and Sexuality" during the academic year 2019-2020; hers will take place in fall 2019 and focus on repertoires prior to 1800, while mine will be scheduled in spring 2020 and focus on post-1800 repertoires. This division will allow us to expand our offerings in this area and present a larger swath of repertoires and issues. Ideally, Dr. Levenson and I hope to offer these two courses as a "sequence" quite regularly, not only in hopes of expanding the number of students within Crane who have expertise in this area, but also increasing the number of Crane students who might consider adding a minor or double major in Women & Gender Studies.