

Teaching Reflection

Spring 2020

MUCH 495: Music, Power, and Politics, post-1945

This was an amazing class—I was very lucky to have this set of students this term. They were so passionate and interested in the topics, and even with all the upheaval due to the pandemic, they were present and focused every week. They were really a teacher's dream and the highlight of my week this term. [And once again this class was at 8am, really a very difficult set of topics to plunge into first thing in the morning, but they were always up to the task].

This is now the third time I have offered this course at Crane (previous offering in Fall 2017 and a graduate iteration in Summer 2019). In this upper-division course, while the politics of popular music is obviously very important, I continue my deliberate focus on art music, as it is critical for us to talk about how concert musics are not "above" politics (stances which continue to be uttered by artists, performers, and audiences). In today's parlance, we often hear artists encouraged to "stay in their lane." I also continue to find the post-1945 framework useful since these musics are sometimes underserved in the ever-expanding chronological reach of Music History III. I've followed through on my two objectives from the first time I taught this course: changing some course content and offering a graduate version, so I feel I'm continuing to sit with and make changes to this course in fruitful ways.

Spanning musics from the era of World War II through pieces related to 9/11, my general content remained the same, covering music from concentration camps and the *Quartet for the End of Time* to the use of music as a means of torture by the CIA after 9/11 and John Adams's *On the Transmigration of Souls*. This semester, however, I was really pleased to add four new units to this iteration of the course: a reading on "The Black Forum Label" of Motown, a reading on cultural appropriation, a lecture from my own new research on music and protest, and a chapter from William Cheng's brand new book on music and ethics, *Loving Music Till It Hurts* (Oxford 2020). The reappointment dossier contains both the assignments and student forum responses to the cultural appropriation reading and Will Cheng reading. I felt both of these assignments offered a really invaluable opportunity for students to dig in to very relevant material; multiple students commented on the necessity of *understanding* the concept of cultural appropriation better, as opposed to just something to be afraid of or avoid. Several noted that this was a really useful corollary to discussions in their music education courses, so I enjoyed that synergy across different majors coming into play.

The class was initially relatively similar in content and design to other upper division courses I've taught: essentially a seminar-style approach with a scaffolded final research podcast as a major element. Many students in this course produced outstanding term projects, including studies of yellowface in *Madama Butterfly*, the politics of the *corridos* of the Mexican-American border region, the performances of Pussy Riot, and the connections between music and gun violence in American schools. This time, I gave them really specific questions and word counts for their podcast script. That seemed to generate a more polished final product (and lessen anxiety) in comparison to previous semesters: you may see the appointment dossier for an example of the partial podcast script assignment.

Once the pandemic began, I restructured the distance learning version into two asynchronous days (Monday and Wednesday) and one synchronous meeting (Friday). On Monday the students were assigned asynchronous reading, on Wednesday the students were asked to watch an asynchronous lecture. Pulling on

both these activities, they were then asked to provide a Moodle forum post. On Fridays we met to discuss and work on other activities to expand our knowledge of the week. The forum posts were terrific—they really primed our discussions on articles and issues even in this strange physically distanced classroom space. The last week of the semester and the course redesign did necessitate that I remove some content from the class (basically cutting readings and topics by about 50%). Yet curtailing the content did not negatively impact the class; students still dug in with vigor, debating the course's questions eagerly despite the virtual setting. I do find having a full section of 16-17 students and a 50-minute MWF time slot is sometimes challenging for an upper-division seminar—it can make it hard to get everyone's comments in in that short amount of time.

In terms of overall feedback on this course, student comments were overwhelmingly positive. The students seemed to really enjoy the content, the approach, and the ability to dig into these topics. I loved the fact that students in general felt they learned a great deal and were able to approach potentially challenging subject matter safely (some of that was due to the cohort as much as anything I was doing!). Pulling upon a few different student comments, one noted "this was a fabulous course. I love that it was structured to foster thought-provoking discussion in class. Sometimes it is difficult to speak up in classes, but Dr. Brooks creates a safe environment where everyone feels their input is valid."

I also appreciated that this course adjusted quickly and well to a virtual learning environment. Many students commented that the way the course's mid-semester shift to online learning worked really well: one noted "I think Dr. Brooks was also able to make this class just as fruitful when we transitioned to online classes. I loved the structure she put in place. While in some of my other classes I feel the switch to online learning deprived me of getting the full potential out of the class, Dr. Brooks' work to maintain the integrity of this class was very much appreciated." I do think that this particular cohort of students was special; many of them were excellent students in general, and quite a few were in their last semester of coursework. While it was a sad way to have to finish our time together, this class was a wonderful bright spot in a really difficult time.