

Teaching Reflection

Spring 2020

MUCH 495: Music, Gender, and Sexuality, post-1800

This is now the third time I have offered this course at Crane (previous offerings in Spring 2018 and Spring 2019), with the hope I could teach it regularly as an upper division music history elective with potential crossover to attract Women's and Gender Studies students. I'm really happy 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 likewise pleased to have this syllabus listed as containing “diversity rich content” through DIAC. The class has proved popular; it's been full every time I've offered it, with multiple students asking to be added above the cap. This has benefits and drawbacks, one of which is that due to intense interest from Crane—and possibly the need for more advertising across campus—I've never actually had any Women's and Gender Studies students enroll in this course (because the seats were already full). Upon discussing this issue, the immense amount of potential content in a course on music, gender, and sexuality, and her own scholarly interests, Dr. Erica Levenson and I agreed to split this course into a two-semester sequence. She would teach a semester course entitled “Music, Gender, and Sexuality, pre-1800” and I would teach a subsequent course on “Music, Gender, and Sexuality, post-1800.” This was the first year of this approach, with continued intense student interest in both courses. Interestingly, only one or two students took both semesters of this sequence, but we have plans to institutionally solidify this sequence through permanent course numbers, regular alternation, and publicity across campus (possibly through Interdisciplinary Studies as well as Women's & Gender Studies). Given these changes, I was able to add a good deal of new content to this course, or to find new ways of teaching preexistent content (for example, I added new readings on exoticism and Richard Dyer & disco). The class also benefited from a joint guest lecture on musicals, gender, and sexuality given by Dr. Amanda Winkler (Syracuse University). I was particularly gratified to add an entirely new unit on “Music in the Era of #MeToo” at the end of the semester, which generated a powerful and poignant set of class discussions. In this course, I also spent time thinking anew about how to integrate trigger warnings into this class, given certain course content.

The course is divided into two parts: art musics from the 19th century to mid-20th century prior to the midterm, then topics from 20th and 21st-century American popular music for the rest of the semester. 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 project as a major element. Once the pandemic began, I restructured the distance learning version 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. The forum posts were terrific—they really primed our discussions on articles and issues even in this strange physically distanced classroom space. The lost 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.

Besides the obvious challenges of the pandemic: one hurdle in this specific semester was maintaining a civil space for discourse and dialogue. One student in this course had extremely strong views on music, gender, and sexuality—often very well-informed views, but sometimes expressed in aggressive ways when talking with other students. At the beginning of the semester, another student came to have an office hour with me and expressed some concerns about interacting with the first student in class (there had been some past history of difficulty in other courses). Ultimately, I think I negotiated this fairly well. I was particularly attentive to sensing emotion and “reading the room” in this section, often taking care to redirect/attend to difficult spots in the classroom dialogue. I think I ultimately provided a space for my student to express powerful views without feeling stifled, while the other students in the class did not feel attacked or afraid to speak out. One student even commented on the evaluations that “the environment in the class was supportive even though the subject matter can be difficult.”

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 felt extremely encouraged that some students felt that this class might change their own approaches as pedagogues: one student noted that they were “always looking for ways to bridge musical content to students' real experiences and lives, and Dr. Brooks really modeled that for me. All of our students have been in situations where they feel powerful and powerless, and music can help represent these feelings.”

Ultimately, even in this unbelievably difficult semester, I felt this class worked. Like every one of my courses this spring, students in this class had extraordinarily difficult things to deal with, including COVID infections, stress about jobs and money, and many deeply scary events connected to the pandemic. I was sorry there was such a need for mental health support, but quite a few of them reached out and we had office hours, phone calls, and other check-ins. It felt wonderful to know that they felt I was there for them: one student wrote: “during this difficult transition to online learning, her class was the only one that remained somewhat the same as before and I appreciated that. She was always there for me either through email, a phone call, or text and I'm very thankful for that.” I hope we never have a semester like this again, but I feel like this class managed to make it through.