

MUSIC 780
Fridays 2–5

Seminar in Theory: Analyzing Popular Music
Spring 2005

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Reserves

Books for required readings and other key texts on popular music have been placed on reserve in the Marian Anderson Music Study Center. In addition, various recordings pertinent to our readings are on reserve in the Ormandy Center. A complete list of reserve items can be accessed through the “Course Reserve” section of Franklin. At times, recordings not owned by the library will be placed on the Blackboard course website at <http://courseweb.library.upenn.edu>.

Many of the required readings from journal articles can now be accessed through JSTOR and other online resources for viewing, downloading, and/or printing. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the JSTOR title list, available from the Penn library website; JSTOR journals from which we will reading this semester include *American Music*, *Ethnomusicology*, and *Popular Music*. In some cases you will still need to go to the library to copy or view the musical examples; do not omit this step!

Course goals and overview

The goals of this course are principally two-fold: first, a nuanced knowledge of the issues, concerns, and methodologies of contemporary popular-music research; and second, enhanced ability to engage with popular music as a sounding phenomenon and to employ close readings of its musical organization within interpretive arguments.

At present, popular-music research occurs within many different disciplines, including theory, ethnomusicology, and musicology, as well as numerous fields outside of music (especially communication, cultural studies, and sociology). Our course will reflect this interdisciplinarity: readings will come from a variety of fields, and assignments will not be limited to music theory and analysis. A principal aim will be to highlight a number of issues that have emerged as recurring points of concern within popular-music scholarship as a whole. Most classes will be organized primarily around one or two of these issues, which will include value, authenticity, gender, sexuality, and representation, among others. We will also explore research on various topical areas of concern, such as music video and non-Western popular music.

At the same time, as a music-theoretical endeavor, this course will be particularly concerned with the musical dimensions of this phenomenon. Indeed, we will see that questions about how and to what extent popular music ought to be studied *as* music have been constant sources of debate among scholars. In addition to reading a variety of theoretical and analytical work, we will explore two specific dimensions of popular music—rhythm and harmony—in detail. In addition, you will be transcribing and analyzing popular music throughout the semester and in your final papers. The goals of these activities will be to enable you to engage with its sonic organization in a detailed way, in order to bring aspects of its musical presence to bear within broader interpretations.

A third strand to be woven into these explorations is methodology. How is popular music to be studied, and what are the possible outcomes of various ways of approaching it? Throughout the semester, we will read some of the considerable literature exploring these questions.

The course will not be centered around particular repertoires or historical periods within popular music; however, a number of readings will focus on club music and culture. As a result, this topic will serve a kind of case study for many of the issues we will be exploring.

Assignments and grading

Class preparation and participation (10%)

Transcriptions (2 @ 7.5% each = 15%)

At two points during the semester, we will all complete a transcription of an assigned work, focusing on a particular musical parameter (e.g., rhythm). On the day each transcription is due, we will discuss in class the issues and problems we encountered and the choices we made.

Ethnography assignment (10%)

This assignment will focus on the musical and cultural behaviors of clubbing crowds in Philadelphia. You will attend a specified club on two occasions and write a short paper in response.

Journal (15%; due **April 22**)

Fans consistently describe popular music in terms of their personal involvement with it, while intellectual insights often begin with an intuition about one's subject. I would like you to keep a journal throughout the semester as a means of tapping into this potential source of inspiration and working out ideas in an informal manner. At the beginning of the semester, I imagine that the entries might address issues raised in the readings or in class discussion, thoughts about popular music in general, and initial explorations of where your final paper might go. (For instance, if a reading focuses on a particular song, you might write about what you find striking about the song, whether the reading addressed this quality sufficiently, and why or why not.) As the semester unfolds, journal entries will increasingly focus on the topic of your final paper. I want you to develop an obsession for the music you are studying: listen to it frequently, and use whatever resources you can—journalistic reviews, web sites, internet chats, fan interviews—to learn more about it. Use your journal to record your reactions to these sources and your ideas about what you would like to say.

At a minimum, write two journal entries per week, with each being about one double-spaced page or more. During the last week of class, review what you have written and write a brief entry discussing the development of your ideas across the semester and indicating several representative entries that you would especially like me to read. In evaluating your work, I will be looking not so much for polished writing as for evidence of a substantial and serious engagement with the ideas of the course and your paper topic.

Final project (50%)

Part 1: Paper proposal and bibliography (10%; due **March 4**).

Part 2: Preliminary analysis and transcription (10%; due **April 1**).

Part 3: Final paper and presentation (30%; due at time of presentation).

See pp. 5–6 for complete descriptions of each part of the final project.

Further details about the transcription and ethnography assignments will be distributed as the semester unfolds. Also, please note the following:

- Reserve 8:30–10:30 a.m. on Thursday, April 28, for a possible meeting. This is our official final exam time; although we will not have an exam, we may use this time for a final class meeting.
- Class will be cancelled on Friday, February 18, as I will be attending the Society for American Music conference in Oregon (you are encouraged to attend as well).

Detailed description of final project

Part 1: Paper proposal and bibliography (due Friday, March 4)

Explain the anticipated subject of your final paper and the way(s) in which you will approach it (your focus, angle, questions, and/or issues), as well as your research methods, materials, goals, and anticipated outcome. Describe the relevant research on your topic from our class readings and discuss keywords and concepts. Include a bibliography of other works that are (or seem) relevant and will be useful for the project in terms of the subject matter, theory, concepts, and so on.

It is essential that you begin working on your project as soon as possible. I suggest that you immediately use your journal to write a paragraph each for a few ideas that are of interest to you. From those paragraphs you can subsequently choose one idea and develop it. We will discuss ideas further in class during the first few weeks of the course.

You will be preparing proposals throughout your career (for conferences, fellowships, grants, new courses, etc.). Think of this as an opportunity to polish your skill in writing this important genre. The calls for papers of the Society for Music Theory regularly state that “proposals will be read for originality, clarity, and appropriateness for oral presentation. Although there is no single correct format, the program committee will look favorably on proposals that clearly state the intended contribution to scholarship in relation to previous research, and that provide specific evidence of theoretical and/or analytical results.” Aim for the same qualities in your proposal for this class. Proposals typically include an introduction that succinctly describes your subject, approach, and thesis, as well as more extended sections covering the scope, purpose, methodology, and significance of your work.

In short, your proposal should be more than just a description of your topic; it should be a coherent and polished whole that demonstrates evidence of preliminary research as well as time spent thinking about your subject. In the case of proposals for analytical papers, “evidence” often includes one or two musical examples as well as references to the relevant sources. Concision is important, however; do not include extraneous material.

Your proposal should include a maximum of 3 pages of text, as well as a bibliography and any musical examples. The bibliography and examples should not be figured into the page count.

Part 2: Preliminary analysis and transcription (due Friday, April 1)

Turn in 4–6 pages of analytically oriented prose focusing on the music you will be discussing in your final paper. Depending on what you are planning to discuss, this could be an analysis of a single song, a comparison of two pieces, or an examination of a particular musical phenomenon within an extended passage. Also turn in about half of your transcription, with a recording. This portion of the assignment is intended primarily as an opportunity for early feedback on your analysis and representation of important musical details. At this stage, I am not looking so much for a coherent essay or polished prose as for accurate and insightful commentary on the music’s organization. In relation to your final paper, I am imagining that you might select and condense the most relevant portions of this exercise after completing it, integrating these observations into a larger argument.

Part 3: Final paper (due at time of presentation)

The most significant project you will undertake this semester will be an analytically oriented paper. Any music that might be described as “popular” is an acceptable subject; however, the paper must meet the following requirements:

- It must include a significant analytical component. At least one work must be discussed in detail. Your discussion should demonstrate a thorough understanding of the sonic design of the piece(s) in question.
- You are free, and in fact encouraged, to incorporate interdisciplinary methodologies and theoretical orientations into your paper. Your analysis must be an essential part of your argument, however; any additional approaches you employ must relate to it in a logical way.

Instead of the usual seminar paper, you will instead write a shorter conference-style paper. The exact length, which will be specified subsequently, will depend upon the number of people in our class, but you should expect something in the vicinity of 8–12 pages. You will present your paper formally in a short “session” including a question-and-answer period; collectively, the papers will constitute a small symposium that will be open to the department as a whole.

You should present your musical examples and bibliography in a handout, with enough copies for those present; these will not count toward the page limit.

With the paper you should also turn in a thorough and substantial transcription (minimum: about four minutes of music). The transcription will function as evidence of a close engagement with the sonic organization of the music you have been studying and will also illustrate your ability to make critically informed decisions regarding the representation of musical phenomena. The complete transcription is to be turned in to me; your presentation handout should include only those portions of the music that are relevant to your argument.

Think of your paper as scholarship. Allow time to proofread and revise your work. Also realize that analysis in particular requires a significant amount of time spent listening to and thinking about the piece(s) you are studying; you will need to immerse yourself in the sound-world of this music over the course of the semester.

Feel free to share drafts with classmates for the purposes of mutual critique. I will also consider drafts, provided that they are submitted far enough in advance to allow adequate time to read them.