

Philosophy 67: Philosophy of Music

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Class meetings: Tuesdays 2–4:30 in Cooper House 201
Office Hours: Thursday 1–2, and by appointment

Topic:

Music is sometimes described as a language, but what, if anything, does Charlie Parker’s “Ah-Leu-Cha” say to us? If music isn’t representational, then how should we understand its connection to the various emotions that it can express and invoke? (Or maybe these aren’t genuine emotions: Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* is widely described as sad, but what exactly are we (or is it) sad about? And why would we choose to listen to Mozart’s *Requiem* if it genuinely terrified us?) Perhaps our musical descriptions and experiences are metaphorical in some way—but how, and why?

What exactly is a musical work anyway? Where, when and how do “Summertime,” or “Stairway to Heaven,” or “Shake Ya Tailfeather” exist? And what makes for a performance of one or the other (or of no work at all)?

What, if anything, guides a proper “listening” or understanding of a musical work? Does it require knowledge of relevant musical and cultural conventions, or of the composition’s historical context, or even of the composer’s intentions and guiding aesthetic philosophy? (Think of gamelan music; think of the *Sgt. Pepper’s* album; think of John Cage.)

What determines whether a work, or a performance of it, is good? What role is played by beauty, grace, intensity and so on? And how objective are these aesthetic properties? Finally, why do we sometimes find music to be not just enjoyable, but intensely moving and even profound?

Prerequisites:

Two courses in philosophy. This seminar is designed for upper-division philosophy majors, and they will be given preference in enrollment.

Readings:

There are two books for the seminar: Introduction to a Philosophy of Music, by Peter Kivy, and This is Your Brain on Music, by Daniel J. Levitin. Both books are available from the Amherst Bookstore, at 8 Main Street in downtown Amherst. We will also discuss a number of articles, book-sections, and other texts that I have collected in a course-reader, which is available in the Philosophy Department Office (Cooper 208). There will be a few additional readings, photocopies of which I will distribute in class ahead of time. Unless you tell me otherwise, I will have our department assistant charge your college account directly for the cost of these distributed photocopies.

The readings will not be excessive, but they will often be dense (in the “compact and difficult” sense). So you will be expected to read each assignment carefully, which usually

means more than once. And you will be expected to keep up with assigned readings and to come prepared to talk about them. In order to facilitate this, I ask you to send an e-mailed “response” to me by 11:30 on Tuesday morning in which you articulate some sort of reaction—develop a question, articulate a confusion, explore a criticism—to the week’s readings. (It helps me if you send these responses as word or pdf attachments to an e-mail with “response” somewhere in the subject heading.)

Assignments:

I am still uncertain about the constitution of the seminar (i.e., the number of seminarians and their backgrounds), so some of the seminar’s structural and bureaucratic details remain undecided. However, the assignments will be roughly as follows: a final term paper (probably in two drafts) of medium length (8-15 pages) due at the end of the semester; possibly one short paper (4 pages) due after the first month; weekly responses to the readings. I may also arrange for in-class presentations. I have described the weekly reading responses above. I will not formally grade them, but they are required in order to pass the course. The final seminar paper can concern almost any topic that we will have investigated during the course of the seminar. I will guide you through the process of choosing a topic, and writing on it. However, you should stay mindful as the seminar proceeds to topics that you might want to write on.

Attendance:

Attendance at all seminar meetings is mandatory. If you foresee any potential conflict or other problem with your complete attendance let me know well ahead of time.

Number of Breaks Per Seminar Meeting:

One

Seminar Outline:

Here's a tentative schedule of the topics and texts we'll investigate. All readings are either from the course books or the course-reader. I encourage any input about preferred topics, readings, or other course mechanics.

1/27: Themes & Program Notes

2/3: Sound & Music

Robert Pasnau, "What is Sound?"
[Casati & Dokic, "Sounds"]
[Kulvicki, "The Nature of Noise"]
Stephen Davies, "John Cage's 4' 33": Is it Music?"
Daniel Levitin, Ch. 1

2/10: Musical Taste

Simon Frith, "What is Bad Music?"
Robert Sapolsky, "Open Season"
Background:
Marcia Eaton, "Aesthetic Concepts"
Ted Cohen, "Artistic Taste"
Levitin, Ch. 8
Bring your own examples of good & bad music

2/17: Music & Emotions I

Peter Kivy, Chs. 2–5

2/24: Music & Emotions II

Kivy, Chs. 6–8

3/3: Music & Emotions III

Davies, "Philosophical Perspectives on Music's Expressiveness"
Levitin, Ch. 6, 9

3/10: The Philosophy of Jazz & Rock

Theodore Gracyk, "The Aesthetics of Popular Music"
Robert Kraut, "Why Does Jazz Matter to Aesthetic Theory?"
Andrew Kania, "Making Tracks: the Ontology of Rock Music"

SPRING BREAK

3/24: Metaphysics I: Structuralism vs. Contextualism

Kivy, Ch. 11, "The Work"

Davies, "Ontologies of Musical Works"

3/31: Metaphysics II: The Truth (!?)

Cameron, "There Are No Things That Are Musical Works" (to be handed out)

Moore, "Musical Works: a Metaphysical Mash-up" (to be handed out)

4/7: Improvisation (w/ Jason Robinson)

Readings TBA

4/14: Repeating & Rehearing

Meyer, "On Rehearing Music"

Kivy, "The Fine Art of Repetition"

Levitin, Ch. 4

4/21: Philosophy in Music I: Wagner & Schopenhauer (w/ Jenny Kallick?)

McGee, The Tristan Chord, Chs. 8, 9, 12

4/28: Philosophy in Music II: 20th Century Hoax? (w/ Richard Beaudoin)

Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed"

Christopher Washburne, "Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?"

Dmitri Tymoczko, "The Sound of Philosophy"

Diana Raffman, "Is Twelve-Tone Music Artistically Defective?"

5/5: Profundity & Beyond

Kivy, Ch. 13, "Why Should you Listen?"

Ridley, "Profundity"

Friday, 5/15: Final Papers Due

A possible substitute for one meeting in the semester's second half:

Musical Transformations: Transcriptions & Covers