

Music, Culture and Ideas (MTH 5710.20)

Purchase College SUNY

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Tues-Thurs. 7-8:20
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This course critically surveys various traditional and contemporary answers to two deceptively simple questions: *What is music?* and *What is music's importance for human beings?* No one who cares about music can avoid asking them. But like all philosophical questions, they are notoriously difficult to answer in a way that satisfies everyone. Since the days of the performance medium the ancient Greeks called *mousike*, Western philosophy and criticism have watched all sorts of large claims about music come and go. For example:

- Music is a set of purely formal relations approaching the abstractness of mathematics;
- Music is stylized form of the life (including the sexual life) of the body;
- Music is the expression of emotion;
- Music is an expression of the experience of time;
- Music is a special kind of cognition;
- Music expresses our natures as religious or moral or political beings...

The list goes on. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, claims like these took on a new focus with such modern inventions as the idea of the "musical work" as a distinct object, the secular institution of the concert, and the idea that music (with painting, sculpture, dance, literature, and architecture) is a *fine art* whose function is to afford *aesthetic experience* --a form of disinterested, pleasurable contemplation possessing value apart from religious, moral, political, or other "extra-aesthetic" purposes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these ideas became central to Enlightenment and Romantic aesthetic theories. In the twentieth century they culminated in the aesthetic worldview of cultural modernism, which portrayed each of the fine arts as an historically developing world of autonomous forms unto itself. Music, it was now claimed, is essentially only "about" music, painting only about painting, dance only about dance, and so on. And those who don't experience the arts in this autonomist and formalist way, the argument continued, need new beliefs about the arts if not also an overhaul of their tastes. In a way, modernism provided the twentieth century, especially in the affluent and developed countries, with a secular religion.

But now critics generally agree that the heyday of modernism, if not all of its echoes in artistic thought and practice, is over. This raises the inevitable question, What Next? A familiar answer is "Postmodernism," a many-faceted and ill-defined cultural sensibility whose beginnings are often traced back to the Sixties. Since then, we have witnessed a dizzying explosion of new movements in the arts (in music, this includes Minimalism, Hard Bop, Heavy Metal, Rap, Third

Stream, World Music and computer-generated music); new multicultural formations in our larger society; and radically new technologies for reproduction and invention which were scarcely imaginable to the original audiences of classical aesthetics. (Some are now speculating that in a hundred years, computers may be capable of genuinely human levels of intelligence and creativity--a thought that has dramatic consequences for how we think about art and much else.)

So these are interesting times for the philosophy of music. We'll pursue the main themes of this course, listed in more detail below, against the backdrop of two basic assumptions. The first is that there remains much of value in the traditional aesthetic philosophy of music and the other arts, even if some parts of that philosophy are no longer viable. And second, these recent developments force us to ask new, twenty-first century, questions about where human creativity, in music and elsewhere, comes from, what it is for, and what forms it is likely to take in the future.

Texts

- (1) Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (in bookstore)
- (2) Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, The Arts, and Ideas*, 2nd ed. (in bookstore)
- (3) Additional xeroxed packets, available at different points in the semester for a small charge in the Music Office.

Course Policies. This course is primarily for MFA students in the Conservatory of Music. Some auditors are welcome, and a few spaces are available for non-music students. No formal philosophical background is presupposed. But it is assumed that anyone taking the course for credit will be prepared to do close readings of the course materials and to contribute to class discussion. Attendance will be called regularly, and absences are excused only in documented medical emergencies. To pass the course you may have no more than four unexcused absences. Punctual arrival at the beginning of the class is a basic courtesy, as is refraining from eating and non-emergency bathroom trips during class. *Language problems?* Any students who, because they are non-native English speakers or for any other reason, have difficulties with the readings or with any aspect of in-class discussions are always welcome to meet with me outside class. I will do my best to make the materials of the course accessible to everyone.

Written assignments will consist of two short (three typed, double spaced pages or more) essays on assigned topics at different points in the semester, followed by one slightly longer (five pages or more) essay at the end of the semester. There will be no in-class exams. Misrepresenting the work of another author as one's own (i.e., plagiarism) can result in failure of the course.

Schedule of Readings and Discussions

Unless listed as recommended, all readings are required. Depending on the pace of our discussions, I may modify some dates and/or readings during the semester. The readings aren't long in terms of pages for any given meeting; but you will probably find that you need to read each selection at least twice to absorb the material. See my handout "Reading Philosophy." I encourage you to read widely beyond the required readings in our main texts and in other materials I'll place on reserve in the library as your time and interest permit. Two good all-purpose resources for further reading on various subjects in the philosophy of art are the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), which can be found in the library's reference room, and Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics From Classical Greece to the Present*, on reserve. A note about written assignments: Plenty of notice will be given in advance for each assignment and I may decide to alter some deadlines, but please take the deadlines seriously. A letter grade will be taken off for each day an assignment is late.

I. Introductory Themes

January

25 Introduction. Philosophy of music contrasted with traditional "music aesthetics."

27 First readings (all but the first in introductory xerox packet): (i) Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*, chapter 1, "Music and Philosophy" This chapter is helpful but a tad long-winded. So I recommend that you focus on pp. 1-2; 8-11, skim the rest, and then focus on the other readings, which are all in the introductory xerox packet. (ii) Bruno Nettl, "'Musical Thinking' and 'Thinking About Music' in Ethnomusicology: An Essay of Personal Interpretation"; (iii) Roger Scruton, "The Eclipse of Listening"; (iv) Ray Kurzweil, excerpt from *The Age of Spiritual Machines*.

February

1, 3 What should we mean by "good music"? Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, chapter two ("Some Remarks on Value and Greatness in Music"); Simon Frith, "The Value Problem in Cultural Studies" (from *Performing Rites : On the Value of Popular Music*; in xerox packet)

First short paper topic distributed on Feb. 1.

February (cont.)

II. Historical Themes in the Philosophy of Music

8 The Greek legacy: Plato on music as imitation. Bowman, ch. one, pp. 19-35; Plato, excerpt from Republic (xerox packet); Allan Bloom, "Music" (excerpt from *The Closing of the American Mind*; xerox packet)

10 Defending music and other arts against Plato's criticisms. Bowman, pp. 35-47 Recommended: the rest of chapter one. **First short paper due in class.**

15 Kant's aesthetics: Form, Freedom, and Beauty. Bowman, chapter three ("Music as Idea"), pp. 69-91; excerpt from Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (xerox packet)

17 Friedrich Schiller: Aesthetic Education and the "play drive". Bowman, pp. 91-4 and excerpt from Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (xerox packet)

22 G.W. F. Hegel: Fine Art as expression of the Absolute Idea. Bowman, pp. 94-103.

24 Hegel, cont. Bowman, pp. 103-12

29 Arthur Schopenhauer: music and the Will. Bowman, pp. 112-119; Schopenhauer, excerpt from *The World as Will and Representation*; Friedrich Nietzsche, excerpt from *The Birth of Tragedy in the Spirit of Music* (xerox).

March

2 Schopenhauer (cont.) Bowman, pp. 119-30. Recommended: Meyer, "Romanticism--The Ideology of Elite Egalitarians" (on reserve; from his *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology*.)

7 Hanslick on Absolute Music and autonomy. Excerpt from Eduard Hanslick, *On the Beautiful in Music* (xerox packet); Bowman, chapter four ("Music as Autonomous Form"), pp. 140-50

III. Form, Meaning, and Modernism: Twentieth Century Perspectives

9 What makes a piece of music meaningful? Meyer, chapter three ("On Rehearing Music"); Simon Frith, "The Meaning of Music" (chapter 12 of *Performing Rites*); Bowman, "The Values of Musical Formalism" (in Bowman, chapter three, "Music as Autonomous Form", pp. 188-93). Recommended: Meyer, chapter eleven ("The Perception and Cognition of Complex Music")

14, 16 Spring recess; no class

21 Same readings as 2/9. **Second short paper topic (TBA) distributed.**

23 The interplay between cultural beliefs and artistic experience. Meyer, chapter four ("Forgery and the Anthropology of Art")

28 Advising/community day; no class

30 No class.

April

4 What causes artistic styles to change? Meyer, chapter six ("History, Stasis, and Change"). **Second short paper due in class.**

6 Cultural change, artistic change, and the "paradox of modernism." Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (xerox); Meyer, chapter eight ("The Probability of Stasis"): focus especially on pp. 134-37 and 149-69 in Meyer. Recommended: Meyer, chapter seven ("Varieties of Style Change")

11, 13 A formalist vision of post-modernist culture. Meyer, "Postlude"

IV. Recent Challenges to the Modernist Paradigm

18 Is music essentially "gendered"? Susan McClary, excerpt from *Feminine Endings* (xerox); Pieter C. Van Den Toorn, "Feminism, Politics, and the Ninth" (xerox; from *Music, Politics, and the Academy*)

20 Is music essentially "ethnic"? Joel Rudinow, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" Recommended: Simon Frith, "Rhythm: Race, Sex, and the Body" (chapter six of *Performing Rites*; on reserve)

25 Adorno's social critique of popular music and defense of musical modernism. T.W. Adorno, "The Social Situation of Music" (xerox) ; Bowman, chapter seven ("Music as Social and Political Force"), pp. 304-34. Recommended: T.W. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character of Music and the Regression of Listening" (on reserve)

27 Adorno's social critique of jazz. T.W. Adorno, "The Perennial Fashion--Jazz" (xerox)

May

2 A defense of jazz as a challenge to the European high modernist aesthetic paradigm. Lee Brown, "Jazz" (xerox on reserve and in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* in reference room of library)

Final paper topic options distributed.

4 The impact of mechanical reproduction on cultural experience. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (xerox packet); Lee Brown, "Phonography" (xerox packet)

9, 11 Attali on the political economy of music. Excerpt from Jacques Attali, *Noise* (xerox); Bowman, chapter seven, 334-52.

16 Last class; wrap up discussion.

Final essays due in my office by end of day on Friday, May 19