Seminar in Music Theory: Analysis of Post-2000 Popular Music
Spring 2017
W 2:30–5:15
MEH 3244

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Course Description
The scholarship on analyzing popular music has flourished in recent years, having moved into the mainstream of academic music theory and developed sophisticated tools for understanding a variety of popular styles and practices. A large portion of this scholarship concerns popular music of the second half of the twentieth century, inviting us to consider whether the same analytical techniques can readily or profitably apply to the popular music of the twenty-first century. Since the year 2000, popular music has undergone changes in distribution (the internet offering roughly equal access to both major-label and independent music), listening practices (with the increasing dominance of streaming audio and video), and genre (with some new genres, such as the mashup, emerging from internet-based practices). This course will survey a representative literature on popular form, harmony, melody, timbre, subjectivity, and intertextuality, in order to develop a framework for analyzing post-2000 popular music.

Background Reading
Students are not assumed to have prior experience analyzing popular music. The following resources, primarily concerning mid-20th-century music, are recommended for the background they provide in popular music analysis.


Course Requirements

9 response essays (2–3 pages): Write a brief essay in which you respond to some aspect of the reading assigned for that week’s class. There is no set format for the essays, although they should: (1) demonstrate, in some manner, that you have read each of the week’s readings, and preferably, (2) involve some original analysis of music of your choice. Accompanying examples (graphical and musical) are encouraged, although they do not count toward the page length requirement. Essays are due by **10 p.m. Monday**, two days before our class meeting. I will not provide written feedback on the short papers, but I will use them to help shape our class discussion for the week.

Presentation #1 (15 minutes): Analyze a song of your choice, using a theoretical model derived from our class readings. Provide a handout with your analysis, explain what we should listen for, and then play a recording of the song. The presentation should be pedagogical in nature—teach us about the song. I must approve your song choice by February 1. Presentations will take place on **February 8**.

Transcription: Produce a full-score, full-detail transcription of a recorded song of your choice. As the transcription should reflect the song in its specific recorded instantiation, musical elements (rhythms, pitches, etc.) should not be normalized. Include lyrics, timings, formal section labels, and (optionally) other analytical annotations. I must approve your song choice by **March 1**. The transcription project is due on **March 8**.

Presentation #2 (15 minutes): Share copies of your transcription with the class. Explain the notational choices you made, and provide a brief analytical account of the song. Then play a recording. Presentations will take place on **March 8**, the day on which the transcription project is due.

Final paper: Write a scholarly essay of about 12–20 pages, plus appropriate accompanying examples, bibliography, etc. The topic may be repertoire-based (i.e., a close reading of a song, album, or artist) or theory-driven (i.e., application of a theoretical model to a variety of popular music). A proposal (250–500 words, plus preliminary bibliography and list of recordings) is due on **March 29**. The final paper is due during exam week, on **April 26**.

Presentation #3 (30 minutes): Provide a summary of your final paper-in-progress. Include a handout with analytical examples or transcriptions. The 30-minute length includes the time necessary to play any audio or video recordings. The presentation may be formal (conference-style) or informal in orientation, and a class Q&A will follow. Presentations will take place on **April 12 and 19**.

Incompletes: As a general rule, incompletes will not be granted to students who simply do not submit the final paper on time.
January 11
Toward the 21st Century
No essay due


January 18
Form
Essay #1 due


January 25
Harmony
Essay #2 due


February 1
More on the Interaction of Form and Harmony
Essay #3 due


February 8
Presentation #1

February 15
Melody and Scale
Essay #4 due


February 22
Rhythm and Meter
Essay #5 due


March 1
Timbre and Texture
Essay #6 due


March 8
Presentation #2
Transcription due

March 15
No class (Spring Break)

March 22
Subjectivity and Intertextuality
Essay #7 due


March 29
Mashups
Essay #8 due
Final Paper Proposal due


April 5
Rap
Essay #9 due


April 12 & 19
Presentation #3

April 26
Final Paper due