

Conservatory Graduate Seminar 2

CNSV 507

Reverberations—20th / 21st century music and the liminal ear

Spring 2023

Instructor: Dr. Ryan M. McCullough

Thursday, 10am-12pm

Bito 210

rmccullough@bard.edu | (707)633-9033

Office hours: Blum 211, Wednesdays 12-4

“For years, we often did phenomenology without knowing it, which is better than... talking about phenomenology without practicing it.” —Pierre Schaeffer

Course description

The twentieth century represents one of the most complex periods in our species' history, with unparalleled growth in population, meteoric globalization, technological interconnectivity, and environmental destruction. It stands to reason that Western concert music, with its relatively recent emphasis on themes of universal humanism, would begin to branch in dozens of unique and often contradictory directions. Many of these branches were made possible by developments in technology, industrial or even military byproducts that not only facilitated new modes of sound production, but more so profoundly transformed the way music is heard, understood, and disseminated.

This course frames the musical resources of the last century from the perspective of a young composer alive today, born in a time of technological saturation, and unburdened by the major historical traumas of the past (to say nothing of the present). Divided in two parts, the first half of this course emphasizes hands-on explorations of sound, culminating in the production and performance of an electro-acoustic fixed media composition. The latter half of the course, then, will feature a repertoire survey of important musical trends since the 1970s. The goal of this class is for students to emerge as curious, inventive, and flexible interpreters of new music, sensitive to the wishes of composers, and understanding of the challenges they face in today's multifaceted music world.

Course expectations

As Western Classical music has developed, the vocational divide between composers and performers has continued to expand. As such, composition can be a scary prospect for some performers, just as performance can be a stressful proposition for composers. Composition and performance, however, are really two sides of the same coin, as both are about exploring the unknown and articulating a clear vision of these explorations to audiences. As such, ...

- 1) ... trust your instincts. You know more than you realize...
- 2) ... don't expect to spew out your work in one sitting. While it can happen, it is the exception, not the rule. Work in small steps—composition is a progressive process...
- 3) ... understand that everyone has unique backgrounds and experiences, and what's easy for someone one day might be difficult the next. Be supportive of yourself and others...
- 4) ... be willing to take risks and dive into something that might make you uncomfortable.

Grading criteria:

Assignments—20%; Participation—20%; Midterm project—30%; Final project/presentation—30%

Course requirements:

Attendance—given the participatory nature of this course, students must attend class. Absences for auditions, performances, or other major events can be accommodated but must be cleared *at least one week in advance*. Absences for medical reasons or sickness are of course allowed (and in case of the latter, encouraged), just please contact me before class so I know the situation.

Texts—all required readings and scores will be linked to in the course Google Drive

Highly recommended: Tim Rutherford-Johnson, “Music After the Fall”; Paul Griffiths, “Modern Music and After”

Software—for the first part of this course, you will need to download and install Reaper (<https://www.reaper.fm/>), a professional Digital Audio Workstation that is fully free to download and use until such time as you can afford the reasonably priced student license.

Midterm project—for your midterm project, you will compose a 4-7’ long fixed media composition (i.e., “tape piece”) using environmental, acousmatic, and synthetic sounds you have recorded and created over the course of several weeks. This work will be a response to repertoire explored in class, but more importantly a response to the specific characteristics of your source material. This project is due on March 23rd, with a live performance event TBD.

Final project—the final project will consist of a paper and presentation on a work of your choice, written by a living composer (preferably in the last 40 years). Formulated in the style of a 20-minute pre-concert talk, with time for questions, the presentation should explore the composer’s aesthetic background and interests, context for the composition of the work, and generalized analysis for how the work is constructed. Presentations will take place during the final class periods, and the paper (which will be due no later than May 30th) will be a fleshing out of that work.

Course schedule (provisional):

February 2—Beginnings (and endings): *Phantasmagoria*

Introduction to the course, syllabus, expectations

The birth of “post-tonal”

Composition assignment 1: *The Strength of Small Things*

February 9—“Blow up the opera houses!”

Perform composition assignments from previous class

Music post-WWII and “the serial moment”

Basic recording techniques

Composition assignment 2: *The Humble Phonographer*

Reading assignment: Griffiths, Chapters 1-3

February 16—*Deep Listening*TM

Talking through recordings

Musique Concrete and the acousmatic moment

Introduction to Reaper

Composition assignment 3: *Objets sonores*

Listening assignment: Schaeffer, Henry, Messiaen

Reading assignment: Kane/Schaeffer

February 23—*The Strength of Smaller Things*

Elektronische Musik

Basic editing, mixing, processing, and automation in Reaper

Composition assignment 4: *Seed Crystals*

Listening assignment: Stockhausen, Berio, Ligeti

March 2—*How Time Passes*

Form and structure, thinking about organization

Navigating large projects in Reaper

Composition assignment 5: *Maquette*

Listening assignment: Harvey, Oliveros, Lockwood

March 9—*Finishing touches*

Workshop on compositions

Basics of mastering

March 16— *Midterm project*

Soundcheck (performance location/time TBD)

Open reading of Terry Riley's *In C*

March 23—no class (spring break)

March 30—New (and old) Minimalisms

Holy (and unholy) rituals of repetition

April 6—New Tonalities, Part I: *Prime Directive*

Just tuning and (near-)infinite music

April 13—New Tonalities, Part II: *Liminal Music*

Spectralism and the cyborg ear

April 20—New (a)Tonalities: “*Reigen seliger Geister*”

“Musique concrete instrumentale” and its descendants

Separately this week: individual meetings on final projects/presentations

April 27—The Performer, Part I: *Play a Vibration...*

Agency, improvisation, and new forms of virtuosity

Outline for final presentations due

May 4—The Performer, Part II: *The 4:3 Wall*

Musiktheater, Fluxus, and descendants

May 11—TBD

May 18 and 23—final presentations

May 30—**final papers due**