Music—Communication—Community

Spring 2012 • Thursdays 2:30–5:15pm (M263)

MUS–T561 Music Theory: Variable Topics (3 cr.): course 32433

Instructor
Naomi Waltham-Smith
Phone: (812) 855-7346 • Office: M225A • Email: nwaltham@indiana.edu
Office hours: By appointment

Course description
Music's capacity to communicate is one of its most compelling and infectious characteristics. And yet it is notoriously difficult to pin down the source and effect of this widely-experienced phenomenon. The idea that music can communicate seems straightforward enough until one is forced to consider more carefully: What exactly is music capable of communicating? By what mechanism is music able to transmit such communications? What is music communicating if every listener can take away a different message? At this point, the metaphor of music as communication becomes fraught with difficulty and provokes controversy among performers, amateur listeners and scholars alike. This course seeks to explore how music's potential to communicate might be conceptualized from philosophical, music-theoretical, music-analytical and socio-historical perspectives and proposes to examine the notion of communication alongside the closely-related idea that music is not just a product of, but is able actively to mimic and foster, socio-political constructions of community. To this end, we shall read critically a variety of texts that explore this question: essays on hermeneutics by musicologists, an account of musical metaphor by a music theorist with an interest in cognitive psychology, discussions of rhetoric by eighteenth-century theorists and critics, analyses inspired by semiotics, texts in critical theory on communication in modernity and recent French philosophy on language and community.

This seminar will focus on repertoire from the decades around 1800. Arguably at no other point in history would music more prominently foreground its sociable impulse to communicate and to promote human relationships. The prevailing theoretical and aesthetic discourses in the late eighteenth century continued to rely upon a comparison with rhetoric dating back to the early sixteenth century and thereby reinforced the idea of music as a form of communication between composer and listener. It was the rise of the public sphere in the eighteenth century, though, with the attendant transformation of musical life and rapid expansion of amateur consumption, that allowed music's communicative and community-forming character to be visible as never before. Through close analytical readings of selected works, we shall see how these socio-cultural shifts manifest themselves within the musical fabric of the Classical style, with its heightened conventionality, transparency of structural functions and play of signs.

All with an interest in discussing such issues with critical rigour are encouraged to enrol. An understanding of the basic elements of music theory, together with familiarity with techniques for analysing tonal music, is required.

Workload/Course requirements
Weekly readings, listening and score study; enthusiastic participation in class discussion, brief in-class presentations in pairs; short reaction papers, analytical experiments and online questionnaires arising from issues raised by the readings; one substantial paper and formal presentation on an approved topic of your choice.