Music and Those Pesky Emotions
Freshman Seminar
Professor Michael Beckerman

Tuesday 2-4:45
Room 220, Silver

Everyone talks about music in terms of emotions, taking it on faith that music communicates, expresses or contains emotions. But no one has ever seen an emotion under a microscope, and no one seems clear about whether the word represents something real, or whether it is more metaphor or fiction, a stand-in for what we absolutely do not understand. We also do not fully understand whether these emotions, if they really exist, can be meaningfully detached from what we call "ideas" without vastly misrepresenting human experience. Despite this vagueness, no art form is more associated with emotions than music. Although if music does “communicate emotions,” it does not do so any more than painting, ballet or theater, the vocabularies used to discuss music, especially from non-professionals, is rooted in approaches that stress “emotion” over “reason.” While most people would easily accept the idea that it takes a certain amount of “reason” to create “emotionally charged musical vehicles,” people are a bit more resistant to the notion that music also communicates ideas, or even that the separation of the two--ideas and emotions--is done at the expense of greater understanding. This course looks at a selection of musical works to be encountered in the context of a series of interdisciplinary readings to ask questions about just how (and why) we respond to music, and what role what we call "emotions" might actually play in the process.

Learning Objectives

In this course students will develop skills in reading critically; undertaking research and creative work; writing with competence, creativity and power about difficult topics; and getting experience speaking to an audience about various projects. We will also explore the question of how best to represent the effect of a musical work on a listener (as opposed to the written score of the composition) and how to speak effectively about music. Students, in developing their own final project, will be able to explore a larger question of interest to them over several weeks and gain experience presenting that project to the class through an oral presentation.
Grading

Class Participation 10%: Participation covers the following things: being on time to class and fully prepared with questions, fresh ideas, objections(!) to the readings of the day. Contributing to the discussion when appropriate. Obviously different students have different habits, experiences and personalities which will affect the way they participate in class discussion. No one in this class will ever be penalized for who they are, but in a seminar format all are will be encouraged to participate.

Written Assignments 50%

There will be six written assignments (including the 2 “maps”) and the first one will be ungraded and each of the others will count as 10% of the final grade. Please submit papers in Word format to my email address: mike.beckerman@gmail.com. All papers must be double-spaced.

Final Project 40%

The final project will consist of a 10-15 page paper. This may take the form of a research paper into some aspect—historical, philosophical or scientific—relating to the material of the course. Depending on your experience and your interests, this may also take the form of a more scientific effort with a plan drawn up in discussion with the course director. Finally you may propose an essay on some aspect of the course material. We will have a preliminary meeting the week of February 25th to discuss your project the first draft of which will be due the following week. I will also accept proposals for collaborative projects, with the understanding that the amount of work done by each person in the collective is equal to (or greater than…) the amount of work expected from a single individual. In the third week of the semester I will devote some time to discussing the final project in more detail and offering some sample topics.

Disability Disclosure Statement

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

Office Hours: Tuesday 12-2 or by appointment

Meetings: We will have a preliminary meeting to discuss final paper proposals the week of February 25th. A signup sheet will be distributed prior to that week.
Syllabus

Jan 28: Course Introduction: The Problem with Music and Emotions

Feb. 4: What is music anyway?
Reading: Daniel Levitin, This is Your Brain on Music, Chapter 1, “What is Music?" (PDF NYU Classes)
Assignment: Choose any 3 YouTube videos found by searching “What is Music?”
Write a one page reflection on the reading and your viewing. What do we seem to understand about music? What don’t we understand? What questions seem to get left out of the mix? Due, Feb. 3

Feb. 11 A Brief History of Music and Emotions; Emotions and Music in History
Reading: “Emotion in Culture and History,” by Nicholas Cook and Nicola Dibben
Music and Emotion, 45-72
“Music and Affect in the Baroque Period,” PDF (20 pages)
Assignment: Read the above article on the Baroque concept of affects and apply it to any piece of music that you listen to and know well from any genre. What kinds of “musical figures” are present, and do these create some sense of affect as understood by these Baroque music theorists. Your essay should be two pages, double spaced.

Feb. 18 An “Emotional Tour” of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto #2/An “Intellectual Tour” of the Same Piece
Reading: PDF on NYU Classes (20 pages)
Listening: Brandenburg Concerto #2, various recordings available on playlist
Assignment: Using any technique you wish, make a map of at least one of the movements of the concerto. You can use any music theory chops you might have, or create an imaginary graph of how you imagine the piece to proceed. N.B. It will probably take several listenings and some careful thought to do a credible job. Three dimensional projects not required…but accepted!

Feb. 25 The Modern Study of Music and Emotions
Oliver Sacks, Musicophilia, pp. 260-304 [NYU Classes]

Mar. 3 The Neurobiology of Emotion: Contemporary Perspectives
“Musical Expectancy and Thrills,” David Huron and Elizabeth Margulis, Music and Emotion p.575-604
http://syncproject.co/blog/2015/7/21/music-and-emotion
Assignment: First Draft, Final Project Proposal Due (see Final Project description)
Mar. 10  Emotion and Meaning in Music

Mar. 17: NO CLASS SPRING RECESS

Mar. 24: An Emotional Tour of Beethoven’s Symphony #5/An Intellectual Tour of the Same Piece
Reading: E.T.A. Hoffman on Beethoven’s 5th (PDF-10 Pages)
Various articles from the Norton Critical Score of the symphony (20 pages)
Listening: Several recordings of Beethoven’s 5th will be available on your playlist.
Assignment: As above with the Brandenburg Concerto, make a map representing the affective progress and process of either a single movement or the entire composition. Once again, you can rely on the score or your ears, but this will be an attempt to map the effects of the piece as you understand them. At the end, briefly speculate on the impossible question of whether the “whole” in this case is the sum of its parts, or somehow transcends them.

Mar. 31 Music, Emotions and “Human Flourishing”
Reading: “Music Health and Well Being” by Suzanne Hanser, Music and Emotion, 849-878
Assignment: Pick any article related to music and well-being. It could be related to musical therapy for stroke victims; issues involving music and mental health, or music, aging and dementia, and write a 3-4 page essay on best practices in that particular area. We will discuss this project the week before.

Apr. 7 Music, Emotion, Taste, Personality
Reading: “Preference, Personality, and Emotion,” Peter Rentfrow and Jennifer McDonald in Music and Emotions, p,669-696; “The Influence of Affect on Music,” Vladimir Koneční, Music and Emotions, p.697-724; Noel Baer, Article on “Taste” in University of Chicago, Theories of Media:
http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/taste.htm
Wikipedia article on “Taste (Sociology)”; Thomas Brett, “On Flavors, Sound and Perception”
Apr. 14  Musical Emotions/Musical Reason: Towards a Synthesis  
“Subject Position in Music,” Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening*, p.91-125  
“Ideas and Emotion in Music from Sweelinck to Gideon Klein,” Michael Beckerman, (PDF) 20 pages  
Listening:  Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, *Chromatic Fantasia*; Gideon Klein, *Trio for Strings*  

Apr. 21  Final Report Presentations  

Apr. 28  Final Report Presentations  

Basic Course Bibliography  

[The most important book for the course is the *Handbook of Music and Emotion*. While I will place PDF’s of the required chapters on NYU Classes, it is suggested that you purchase the volume if you can. Other readings may be assigned during the run of the course.]  


http://syncproject.co/blog/2015/7/21/music-and-emotion