MAP
Fall 2005

Expressive Culture: Sounds

1. The crew:

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2. The class:

Contemporary soundscapes are saturated with all kinds of music. To some, there is a sense of dread: music’s ubiquity – a sonic cacophony of sorts – might render it banal and incapable of offering little more than amusement, serving as a convenient social lubricant, or alerting us to a caller in our cell phones. To others, all these sounds confirm music’s status as a fundamental and irreducible expression of human experience across cultures.

We will examine the notion of ‘expressive culture’ through musical forms from wide geo-cultural spheres and historical moments, critically considering music’s ubiquity topically and from a number of perspectives. The class is organized around three units. First, we will develop a basic vocabulary through which to communicate our musical impressions and explore creative strategies for listening. Second, we will consider basic analytic categories for musical expression, embodiment, sentiment, and the very idea of listening. Third, we will explore how and why we make sense of and use music in a variety of ways: music and/as the everyday; music and the culture industry; music and/as style; music and/as technology; music and/as authenticity.

3. The expectations:

a) Showing up: Attendance to class or discussion section is compulsory, as is attention and participation. There is a sliding scale: Three absences will lower your final grade by one letter, no joke (class and recitation each constitutes a separate absence); two more absences will lower your grade by another letter; one more absence will lower your grade by another letter, etc.

b) Reading-Listening-Writing: There will be a set of reading and listening assignments. Students will keep a journal of responses to all reading and listening assignments. On weeks 5, 9, and 13, written responses will consist in 1000-word short papers (four printout pages, double spaced). Journals will be collected for revision from time to time, without warning: Please make sure you bring your journal printouts to all recitations, we will not accept them afterwards. When writing responses, try to focus your thoughts to one point, and do it well, rather than offer a blow-by-blow recount of a set of readings.
c) Talking: Students are expected to participate both in class and recitation; class participation counts for a lot (see grade percentages below). We will disagree, but personal attacks are not acceptable – remember, most people take their music rather seriously. Questions and observations should range from fundamental basic points to complex. Critical responses to readings should tend towards the constructive: how could you improve on authors’ proposals, rather than dismiss them outright.

d) Musicking: There will be two performances. The first will be the same for everybody, an individual rhythmic exercise for which you will choose your sounds. The second will be done in groups of three students: a performance of an original composition (the parameters are quite open). These projects are equivalent to the midterm and final exams, respectively.

e) Jammin’: We will have two guest musicians and will attend one public performance (t.b.a., outside of class time), courtesy of the crew.

f) Playing it straight: Students are bound by the University’s standards of academic integrity; each student is responsible for downloading the statement from MAP’s website (www.nyu.edu/cas/map/guidelines/academicintegrity.html) and return a copy with your name and signature to your preceptor. Be careful, in particular, when using web sites: we have detecting software to quickly scan your prose for improperly ‘borrowed’ language.

4. Evaluating:

Class grade will combine reading and listening written responses, the two musicking projects, attendance, and class participation – again, in spite of this being a mid-size class, we will (respectfully) offer opinions, agree and (respectfully) disagree on a number of issues.

   a) Written responses and journal: 40%
   b) Musicking projects I and II: 40%
   c) Participation: 20%

Remember: besides sketchy attendance, poor or ‘tude-laden participation can wreak havoc on your grade.

5. The Topics:

Unit 1
Week 1: Introduction: Culture, Expression, and Soundscapes

Week 2: Beats and Grooves

Week 3: Tones and Sounds


Week 4: Form; Texture/Density

Project I: Rhythm’ng (in recitation performances)

Unit 2

Week 5: On Voice


Guest performance 1

First Paper due (Listening)

Week 6: On the Body

Lecturer: mle Wilbourne

Reading: T.B.A.

Week 7: On Depth


Week 8: On Listening


Unit 3
Week 9: On Technology
Lecturer: Michael Gallope
Available on line at http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm
Second paper due

Week 10: The Sonic 1960s: Noise-Music?
Lecturer: Tiffany Kuo
Reading: T.B.A.
Guest performance 2

Week 11: On Taxonomies

Week 12: On Style and Identity
Thanksgiving

Week 13: On Authenticity
Third paper due

Week 14/15: Project II (in class performances)