MUSIC 652. Seminar in Music History: American Experimental Music  
Fall 2015, M 7:00–9:40 p.m., M-228

Instructor: Eric Smigel (esmigel@mail.sdsu.edu)  
M-235, office hours: Mondays & Tuesdays, 3:00–4:00 p.m.

In this seminar we will examine the works and ideas of a selection of composers over the last century who comprise the experimental tradition of American art music. These composers, most of whom are often overlooked in terms of both performance and study, represent an important strand of American musical culture by offering aesthetic, political, and pedagogical alternatives to higher-profile composers of the mainstream tradition. In order to chart the influence of experimentalism across several generations of composers, we will proceed mostly in chronological fashion, and discuss how specific musical features in selected works reflect innovations in the arts that continue to challenge assumptions about what music is, how it is made, and what role it plays in society. In order to gain a historical perspective on the broad cultural and musical context of these composers, our main focus will be on a collection of primary source material, including recordings, scores, and statements by and interviews with the composers.

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to: identify elements of experimental musical styles through both critical listening and score study; describe the historical, cultural, and aesthetic context in which American experimental composers conceived their work; discuss the political and commercial issues facing composers of unconventional music; assess the relationship between a composer’s stated intentions and his or her musical realizations; engage in informed discussions about the validity of various historical and cultural assumptions in the arts; extend the scope of their musical repertoire and aesthetic experience; and apply principles of experimentalism to their own musical activities.

Class Website and Listening Assignments:

Students may consult a website specifically designed for this course on Blackboard (the University’s online network of class websites) from any computer with internet access. The address is: http://blackboard.sdsu.edu. The site includes an electronic copy of the syllabus and course outline, a discussion board, contact information for seminar participants, PDFs of all reading assignments, submission guidelines for the response essays and research project, links to selected media resources, and most importantly, mp3 recordings of all required listening assignments, which appear according to topic in the course outline below.

Evaluation:

Essays (10 @ 60 pts.): 600 pts.  
Each student will be required to submit weekly written assignments (of approximately 750 words) that document his or her response to the works and ideas presented in that week’s listening and reading assignments. The essays must be grammatical, free of misspellings, organized clearly, and they should critically address relevant issues raised by the works in question; they are not meant to express your personal feelings about the music.
Research project: 250 pts.
Students will conduct independent research on a topic concerning the history of American experimental music, write a 15-page paper that places the topic into the context of class discussions, and present an overview of their research to the class during the final weeks of the semester. The entire project will contain the following components, the specifics of which will be outlined in class: 250-word abstract (50 pts.), paper (150 pts.), and presentation (50 pts.). The due date for each component of the research project is listed below in the course outline. As an alternative to a formal paper, students may compose an original musical work or undertake a performance-based research project that engages a specific historical element of American experimental music. Any alternative research must be accompanied by a 10-page paper that situates the work within specific class topics and documents the creative process. All topics must be pre-approved by the instructor.

Please note that students enrolled in this seminar must be familiar with basic principles of research, analysis, and critical thinking with respect to music and music scholarship, and must be able to navigate the printed and electronic information resources available at the University library. Please speak with the instructor if you have not successfully completed MUSIC 690: Research Procedures in Music.

Participation: (10 @ 15 pts.): 150 pts.
It is expected that each student will be thoroughly familiar with each week’s assigned listenings and readings before class in order to contribute meaningfully to class discussions. Students should also be prepared to share key points from their essay assignment with the rest of the class.

Grading Scale

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Other Notes:

Student Disability Services
Students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability must register with Student Disability Services (http://www.sa.sdsu.edu/sds/index.html) who will issue a verification letter. SDS is located in Calpulli Center, Suite 3101, and is open from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Mon-Fri; 594-6473.
Course Outline and Assignments:

January 26: INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENTAL TRADITION

February 2: PIONEERS

Listening: Arthur Farwell, *Navajo War Dance* (1905)
Leo Ornstein, *Suicide in an Airplane* (1913)

Reading: Arthur Farwell, “An Affirmation of American Music” (1903)
Charles Ives, excerpt from *Essays Before a Sonata* (1920)
Leo Ornstein, “Trends of Modern Music” (1921)

February 9: ULTRAMODERNISM I: FUTURISM

Listening: Edgard Varèse, *Hyperprism* (1923)
Henry Cowell, *The Banshee* (1925)
George Antheil, *Ballet mécanique* (1926)
Conlon Nancarrow, *Study No. 3a* (1950)

Gunther Schuller, “Conversation with Varèse” (1965)
Henry Cowell, excerpt from *New Musical Resources* (1919, rev. 1930)
Roger Reynolds, “Interview with Conlon Nancarrow” (1984)

February 16: ULTRAMODERNISM II: DISSONANT COUNTERPOINT

Listening: Carl Ruggles, *Sun-Treader* (1926–31)
Dane Rudhyar, *Three Paeans* (1927)
Ruth Crawford Seeger, *String Quartet No. 2* (1931)
Johanna Beyer, *Percussion Suite* (1933)

Reading: Dane Rudhyar, excerpt from *Dissonant Harmony* (1928)
Charles Seeger, “On Dissonant Counterpoint” (1930)
Charles Seeger, “Ruth Crawford” (1933)

February 23: ALTERNATIVE TUNING SYSTEMS

Listening: Harry Partch, *The Wayward* (1941)
Ben Johnston, *Sonata for Microtonal Piano* (1964)
James Tenney, *Quintext* (1972)
Lou Harrison, *La Koro Sutro* (1972)

Reading: Harry Partch, excerpts from *Genesis of a Music* (1949)
Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, “Interview with Ben Johnston” (1980)
Cole Gagne, “Interview with James Tenney” (1992)
Ben Johnston, “Maximum Clarity” (1996)
March 2: JOHN CAGE

Listening: John Cage, *First Construction (in Metal)* (1939)
John Cage, *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946–48)
John Cage, *Music of Changes* (1951)

Reading: John Cage, excerpts from *Silence* (1961)

March 9: CHANCE AND INDETERMINACY; PAPER TOPIC DUE

Morton Feldman, *Durations I* (1960)
Earle Brown, *Twenty-Five Pages* (1953)
Christian Wolff, *Duo for Pianists I* (1957)

Reading: Morton Feldman, “The Anxiety of Art” (1965)
Earle Brown, “Some Notes on Composing” (1963)
Earle Brown, “The Notation and Performance of New Music” (1964)
David Patterson, “Cage and Beyond: An Annotated Interview with Christian Wolff” (1994)

March 16: MINIMALISM; ABSTRACT

Listening: La Monte Young, *The Well-Tuned Piano* (1964–)
Terry Riley, *In C* (1964)
Steve Reich, *Piano Phase* (1967)
Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976)

Reading: La Monte Young, “Notes on The Theatre of Eternal Music and The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys” (2000)
Cole Gagne, “Interview with La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela” (1990)
Steve Reich, “Music As a Gradual Process” (1968)
Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, “Interview with Philip Glass” (1980)

March 23: SONIC SPACE AND DRONE MUSIC; BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE

David Tudor, *Rainforest IV* (1973)
Pauline Oliveros, *Horse Sings from Cloud* (1977)

Reading: Douglas Simon, “I Am Sitting in a Room: An Interview with Alvin Lucier” (1980)
Teddy Hultberg, “‘I smile when the sound is singing through the space’: Interview with David Tudor” (1988)
Pauline Oliveros, “Software for People” (1978)
March 30: NO CLASS (Spring Break)

April 6: ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Listening: Vladimir Ussachevsky, *Sonic Contours* (1952)
Carl Stone, *Shing Kee* (1986)

Reading: Vladimir Ussachevsky and Otto Luening, *Electronic Tape Music* (1977)
Cole Gagne, “Interview with Morton Subotnick” (1992)
David Rosenboom, “On Being Invisible” (1972)
Frank J. Oteri, “Interview with Carl Stone” (2000)

April 13: PERFORMANCE AND IMPROVISATION

Meredith Monk, *Dolmen Music* (1979)
Anthony Braxton, *Composition No. 131* (1986)

Reading: Melody Sumner, Kathleen Burch, and Michael Sumner, “Interview with Robert Ashley” (1984–85)
William Duckworth, Interview with John Zorn (1999)
Cole Gagne, Interview with Anthony Braxton (1992)

April 20: TOTALISM

Listening: Rhys Chatham, *Drastic Classicism* (1981)
Mikel Rouse, *Dennis Cleveland* (1996)

Reading: Rhys Chatham, excerpt from “Composer’s Notebook” (1990)

April 27: PRESENTATIONS; PAPER DUE

May 4: PRESENTATIONS