

Rock/Pop Music: Theory and Practice

Syllabus

Course Description

Over the course of the 20th century, American musicians developed a family of novel musical genres which achieved massive cultural and commercial influence on a global scale. Major branches of this diverse family include: blues, jazz, country, rock, R&B, pop, and hip-hop. These genres have some ancestry in European folk and art music, and indeed feature many musical structures which would be familiar to 18th–19th century European musicians (e.g., major and minor scales, tertian harmonies, etc.). However, American musicians of diverse ethnic and social backgrounds combined these European traditions with structures and aesthetics of both African and American origin, creating a new musical vernacular which eschews many of the norms of classical music.

This course is intended to introduce classical musicians to the musical structures and performance practices of Anglo-American vernacular (i.e., popular) music. This is *not* a course in popular music history or culture, but rather a detailed exploration of popular music theory and musicianship. We will engage with popular music through scholarly reading and discussion, focused analysis and composition exercises, and through active *musicking*: students will be expected to sing and/or play instruments in class. We will explore distinctive aesthetic features of vernacular music, including *groove*, *heaviness*, and *catchiness*. We will develop musicianship skills in the idiomatic structures of the American vernacular (syncopation, cross-rhythm, improvisation, etc.). By comparing and contrasting the aesthetic goals, musical structures, and performance cultures of art and vernacular music, we will seek a more holistic understanding of 21st-century Western musicality. We will consider how studying and practicing vernacular music can enrich musical academia, and in turn, the role musical academia can play in the modern vernacular music world.

Learning Goals

In this course, you will learn:

- The convergences and divergences between art and vernacular tonality and rhythm.
- Formal structures of popular song, and how they are articulated.
- The musical/textural roles of different pop music instruments.
- The textural and orchestral dynamics of pop arrangements.
- The traditions, conventions, and practices of popular music performance and production.
- The meaning of theoretical and practical popular music terminology.
- The latest popular music scholarship.
- The names and oeuvres of influential, active popular music theorists.

Prerequisites

This course is intended for graduate and upper division undergraduate music students. Previous completion of the core music theory and aural skills sequences is **required**.

Course Structure

The first half of the term will be dedicated to an intensive study of musical parameters central to traditional music theory: pitch/tonality, rhythm/meter, and form. This material will culminate in a midterm composition project. The second half of the term will delve into details of performance: arrangement, texture, timbre, ensemble dynamics etc. Students will continue to expand upon their midterm composition, adding textural/formal arrangements, and timbral details—these additions will be graded as part of the 6–8th homework assignments. In the last third of the term, we will also turn our attention to analysis; the focus of the final two homework assignments and the final.

The detailed course schedule and all course materials (assignments, readings, etc.) are posted on the course website.

Readings

The entire class will read and discuss 1–2 primary articles each week. In addition, for each class, a pair of students will read 1–3 supplementary readings related to the topic and: 1) present a ten-minute report on these articles, and how they relate to the content of the primary readings; 2) lead the class discussion of the topic, especially regarding how their supplementary articles relate to the content of the primary readings. Each student will read and present on supplementary readings twice over the course of the semester—the schedule of these presentations will be decided in the first week of class.

Assignments

Homework

Ten music theory/musicianship assignments will be assigned over the course of the semester. Theory assignments include short melodic/harmonic transcriptions, analyses, and compositions. Musicianship assignments include the vocal or percussive performance of tonal/rhythmic structures learned in class. All assignments are due at the beginning of class.

Midterm

The midterm assignment will be the composition of a short *étude*, arranged for an ensemble including at least one melodic, one harmonic, and one percussive instrument. The goal of this composition is primarily didactic, rather than artistic. The *étude* must feature at least five pop-specific musical structures learned in class, such as: the melodic/harmonic divorce, an idiomatic chord progression, or shift-syncopations. One such feature should be the focus of the composition—the *étude* should highlight and clearly illustrate this chosen feature, particularly as it contrasts with the norms of common-practice music.

A printed score of the *étude*, and an accompanying page of prose explaining the features it employs, must be submitted at the beginning of class in week eight. *Études* will also be performed in class—students must ask their classmates (no outside musicians) to perform their *étude* with them, arranging rehearsal time outside of class if necessary.

The midterm assignment is expanded upon in assignments 6–8. Though the midterm itself is only worth 10% of your grade, in combination with assignments 6–8 the midterm work is ultimately worth 25%.

Final

The final is a written paper 8–10 pages in length. The paper has two components: 1) The theoretical analysis of a popular song, or a collection of songs (with permission), especially regarding divergences from common-practice music norms. This analysis should touch upon multiple musical dimensions (form, harmony, melody, etc.) but focus on *one* feature. 2) A meta-analysis of your own analysis, discussing how traditional classical theory *fails* in its analysis of the song(s); how knowledge gained in this course ameliorates these failures, providing a better understanding of the music; and finally, a discussion of what is still not adequately elucidated through your analysis. Much of the difficulty of this project will be selecting appropriate song(s); the object(s) of your analysis must be selected and approved of by the instructor by the end of week eleven.

Your final project will begin as part of homework assignments 9–10. The final paper is itself worth a relatively small part of your grade (15%)—however, the final project as a whole, including assignments 9–10, amounts to 25% of your grade.

Attendance, Participation

Students are expected to attend and actively participate in all class sessions. Failure to regularly participate in class *will affect your grade*. Because active *musicking* is essential to this course, students are expected to participate not just as theorists and scholars, but as musicians. Exceptional, constructive and helpful participation in class, either as a scholar or as a musician, may be rewarded with as many as five extra credit points.

Grading

Class participation	15 (+5 possible extra credit)
Homework Assignments	50 (5 each)
Supplemental Reading Reports	10
Midterm	10
Final	15

Class Schedule

Week	Due	Major Topic <i>Minor topic</i> Topic
1		Pitch <i>Blues/Rock Tonality</i> Blues scale, Blue notes Harmonic/Melodic divorce The blues progression and its voice-leading The circle-of-Fourths and its voice-leading
2	Assignment 1	<i>Harmony</i> Harmonic loops Extensions, Alterations Non-tertian sonorities
3	Assignment 2	<i>Melody</i> Phrase structure Pentatonicism Contour, Cadence
4	Assignment 3	<i>Counterpoint</i> Parallelism Antiphony Textural segregation
5	Assignment 4	Rhythm <i>The Backbeat, Offbeats</i> <i>Drumming</i> Fills <i>Swing/shuffle</i>
6	Assignment 5	<i>Cross-rhythm</i> Standard patterns <i>Shift syncopation</i>
7		<i>Groove</i> The pocket Micro-timing Riffs
8	Midterm étude	Midterm jam!

Week	Due	Major Topic <i>Minor topic</i> Topic
9		Form <i>Sections</i> Strophes Verse, Chorus, Prechorus, Bridge <i>The Hook</i>
10	Assignment 6	Timbre & Texture <i>Arrangement, Instrumentation</i> Instrumental roles Textural accumulation Layers <i>Idiomatic accompaniments</i>
11	Assignment 7	<i>Instrumental timbres/techniques</i> <i>Vocal timbres/techniques</i> Sprechstimme, Rap Speech-rhythm Vocal cracking, Twang
12	Assignment 8	Performance <i>Ensemble interaction</i> <i>Performance conventions</i> <i>Dynamics</i> <i>Improvisation</i> Jamming
13	Assignment 9	The Studio <i>Sampling, Looping</i> <i>Splicing, Editing</i> Double-tracking <i>Effects</i> Reverb, Delay, Chorus Distortion
14	Assignment 10	Analysis & Interpretation <i>What does analysis tell us?</i> <i>What doesn't analysis tell us?</i>
15		Review & Reassess <i>The limits of theory</i> <i>Intellectualizing the unintellectual</i>
16	Final	

Reading List

- Adams, K. (2008). Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap. *Music Theory Online*, 14(2).
- Adams, K. (2009). On the Metrical Techniques of Flow in Rap Music. *Music Theory Online*, 15(5).
- Attas, R. (2010). Sarah Setting the Terms: Defining Phrase in Popular Music. *Music Theory Online*, 13(3).
- Biamonte, N. (2010). Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music. *Music Theory Spectrum*, 32(2), 95–110.
- Biamonte, N. (2014). Formal functions of metric dissonance in rock music. *Music Theory Online*, 20(2).
URL <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.14.20.2/mto.14.20.2.biamonte.html>
- Brackett, J. (2008). Examining rhythmic and metric practices in Led Zeppelin’s musical style. *Popular Music*, 27(01).
- Burns, G. (1987). A Typology of ‘Hooks’ in Popular Records. *Popular Music*, 6(1), 1–20.
- Callahan, M. R. (2013). Sentential lyric-types in the great american songbook. *Music Theory Online*, 19(3).
- Capuzzo, G. (2009). Sectional Tonality and Sectional Centricity in Rock Music. *Music Theory Spectrum*, 31.
- Danielsen, A. (2006). *Presence and Pleasure: the Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- de Clercq, T., & Temperley, D. (2011). A corpus analysis of rock harmony. *Popular Music*, 30(01), 47–70.
- Doll, C. (2011). Rockin’out: expressive modulation in verse-chorus form. *Music Theory Online*, 17(3), 1–10.
- Doll, C. (2013). Definitions of ‘Chord’ in the Teaching of Tonal Harmony. *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, 18(2), 91–106.
- Everett, W. (2004). Making Sense of Rock’s Tonal Systems. *Music Theory Online*, 10(4).
- Everett, W. (2009). *The Foundations of Rock: From “Blue Suede Shoes” to “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes”*. Oxford University Press.
- Hawkins, S. (1992). Prince: Harmonic Analysis of ‘Anna Stesia’. *Popular Music*, 11(3), 325–335.
- Hesslink, N. (2014). Rhythmic play, compositional intent and communication in rock music. *Popular Music*, 33(1), 69–90.
- Huron, D., & Ommen, A. (2006). An Empirical Study of Syncopation in American Popular Music, 1890?1939. *Music Theory Spectrum*, 28(2), 211–231.
- Johansson, K. G. (1999). The Harmonic Language of the Beatles. *STM-Online*, 2(1999).
- Julien, O. (1999). The Diverting of Musical Technology by Rock Musicians: The Example of Double-Tracking. *Popular Music*, 18(3), 357–365.
- Kautny, O. (2015). *Lyrics and flow in rap music*, chap. 8, (pp. 101–117). Cambridge Companions to Music. Cambridge University Press.
- Keil, C. (1987). Participatory discrepancies and the power of music. *Cultural Anthropology*, 2(3), 257–283.
- Middleton, R. (1983). ‘Play it again Sam’: Some notes on the productivity of repetition in popular music. *Popular Music*, 3, 235–270.
- Moore, A. (1992). Patterns of Harmony. *Popular Music*, 11(1), 73–106.
- Moore, A. (1995). The So-Called ‘Flattened Seventh’ in Rock. *Popular Music*, 14(2), 185–201.
- Nobile, D. F. (2015). Counterpoint in rock music: Unpacking the melodic-harmonic divorce. *Music Theory Spectrum*, 37(2), 189–203.
- Palmer, J. R. (2001). Yes ‘Awaken’ and the Progressive Rock Style. *Popular Music*, 20(2), 243–261.
- Richards, M. (2017). Tonal Ambiguity in Popular Musics Axis Progressions. *Music Theory Online*, 23(3).

- Salley, K. (2011). On the interaction of alliteration with rhythm and metre in popular music. *Popular Music*, 30(03), 409–432.
- Spicer, M. (2004). (Ac)cumulative Form in Pop-Rock Music. *Twentieth-century Music*, 1(1), 29–64.
- Spicer, M. (2017). Fragile, Emergent, and Absent Tonics in Pop and Rock Songs. *Music Theory Online*, 23(2).
- Stewart, A. (2000). ‘Funky Drummer’: New Orleans, James Brown and the rhythmic transformation of American popular music. *Popular Music*, 19(03), 293–318.
- Summach, J. (2011). The Structure, Function, and Genesis of the Prechorus. *Music Theory Online*, 17(3).
- Summach, J. (2012). *Form in top-20 rock music, 1955-89*. Ph.D. thesis, Yale University.
- Temperley, D. (1999). Syncopation in rock: a perceptual perspective. *Popular Music*, 18(01), 19–40.
- Temperley, D. (2007). The melodic-harmonic ‘divorce’ in rock. *Popular Music*, 26(02), 323–342.
- Temperley, D. (2011). Scalar Shift in Popular Music. *Music Theory Online*, 17(4).
- Temperley, D., Ren, I., & Duan, Z. (2017). Mediant Mixture and “Blue Notes” in Rock: An Exploratory Study. *Music Theory Online*, 23(1).
- Traut, D. (2005). ‘Simply Irresistible’: recurring accent patterns as hooks in mainstream 1980s music. *Popular Music*, 24(1), 57–77.
- Van Der Blik, R. (2007). The Hendrix chord: blues, flexible pitch relationships, and self-standing harmony. *Popular Music*, 26(02), 343.
- von Appen, R., & Frei-Hauenschild, M. (2015). AABA, Refrain, Chorus, Bridge, Prechorus—Song forms and their historical development. *German Society for Popular Music Studies e. V.*, 13.
- Wagner, N. (2004). Fixing a hole in the scale: suppressed notes in the Beatles’ songs. *Popular Music*, 23(3), 257–269.
- Weisethaunet, H. (2001). Is There Such a Thing as the ‘Blue Note’? *Popular Music*, 20(1), 99–116.
- Whitesell, L. (2002). Harmonic palette in early Joni Mitchell. *Popular Music*, 21(02).