

MUS 559, Topics in Analysis – Analysis and Performance of Recent Music (On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Transcription for Musical Life)

Instructor: August Sheehy | Monday, 2pm – 4:40pm

The activity of musical transcription involves the conversion of aural experience into a form of writing. Put another way, transcription is a form of musical analysis; one must identify objects and patterns and represent them symbolically. Its practice thus raises several questions that will occupy us in this course: What does transcription afford? What are the limitations of writing? For whom are the answers to these questions most pressing? In what ways might identities—professional and personal—affect the answers?

In grappling with these questions, we will pursue two aims. First, we will critically interrogate practices of transcription through a survey of relevant theoretical, ethnographic, and historical literature. At the same time, we will insist on practical application, focusing attention on what transcription allows us to do. Final projects, developed from Week 5, will involve the transcription of a significant amount of music, reflection on process, and articulation a practical outcome (e.g., knowledge of how to improvise or compose in the style of a particular performer; production of knowledge needed for a style history; development of a novel approach to transcription).

This course is suitable for all graduate students in music (MM, DMA, MA, PhD), and it fulfills the Elective Group 3 requirement for students in the MA or PhD Critical Music Studies track, and fulfills the Elective Group 2 requirement for MM or DMA students. While permission is not required, interested students with specific questions are encouraged to contact the course instructor before enrolling.