

Cover Letter: Music Analysis and Intersectionality

Dear Diversity Course Design Committee,

I present for the committee's consideration this syllabus on "Music Analysis and Intersectionality." In recent years, there have been laudable efforts to diversify the composers whose music we analyze in and outside of the classroom. Two fruits of such efforts may be seen in the *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers* series (edited by Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft) and *Expanding the Canon* (edited by Melissa Hoag); the latter publication focuses on the music of Black composers and musical artists. At the intersection of these identity categories are Black women composers and artists. Their music has been historically marginalized by the academy, but as this syllabus will reveal, analytical scholarship on the subject is burgeoning as of late, and many exciting future directions lie ahead. Some of my teaching goals for this course include bringing further attention to under-represented composers and artists and promoting the relevance of the intersectional framework to music analysis by spotlighting ways it can reveal a piece of music's individuality.

This course brings the advantage of exploring a diverse range of styles, genres, and musical traditions, putting them on an equal footing with each other. Students who take the course will get to encounter a spectrum of voices and viewpoints, and a sizable percentage of the sources assigned for reading, listening, and viewing are recent sources. The heterogeneity of experiences that emerge throughout the semester safeguard against essentialism. The comparative neglect of this topic suggests that we also ought to broaden our idea of what analysis looks like, where it comes from, and what its object should be. The course materials put this stance into practice.

I envision the course as an upper-level music theory elective. Given the articles and book chapters students will encounter through the course, students will ideally have already learned about typical core concepts like form, chromatic harmony, and twentieth-century analytical techniques. The course has the potential to complement other undergraduate electives that may be offered at an institution (such as courses on sonata form, art song, or popular music). If it may not be possible to implement the course as a whole at an institution, I also encourage the adoption of some of the assignments, discussions, and selections of readings outlined in the syllabus. Undergraduates majoring in performance, jazz studies, or commercial music will find clear relevance of the course's subject matter to their own academic pursuits.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes that "Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice" (p. 9). Although this course takes the music of Black women as a point of departure, it is my goal that students will generally learn how music can be used to

promote resistance to domination. In their final project, students will be provided space to apply these ideas to musicians in other identity categories if they so choose.

I appreciate the time and consideration given to this syllabus.

Sincerely,
Stanley Ralph Fink

Music Analysis and Intersectionality (3 Credits)

Course Description

This upper-level topical undergraduate music theory course surveys important recent analytical scholarship on composers and musical artists that have historically been marginalized in more than one way.¹ The range of composers and artists (as well as genres and styles) represented is a testament to the diversity of experiences and perspectives possible within any identity category. The course offers new contexts for familiar analytical subjects of inquiry like form and harmony, while also providing the opportunity to expand the domain of music analysis into new territories such as music videos and concept albums. Lastly, the course offers an opportunity to reflect on the stakes of both music and music analysis as social practices.

Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will:

- Read examples of scholarship that successfully analyze music within Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional framework, and gain experience applying some of the authors' ideas to music on their own
- Familiarize themselves with under-studied and under-researched repertoire
- Develop an awareness of how composers' and artists' identities have been—or may be—addressed in scholarship, and give consideration to future possibilities in this area
- Gain experience identifying deficiencies in the demographics of various canons
- Identify ways a composer or artist's gender and race may be linked (sometimes in subtle ways) in the context of discussions of their music, and the ramifications (historical and present) for such relationships

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term *intersectionality* “to describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism” (1991, 1265).

- Develop the ability to critically reflect on the field of music theory's analytical priorities

Pre-requisites

Students that have completed the core undergraduate music theory curriculum are suited to take this course.

Materials

All assigned publications, sheet music, recordings, and other materials are either hyperlinked below or uploaded to the Course Website.

Grading Scale

93–100 A	90–92 A–	87–89 B+	83–86 B
80–82 B–	77–79 C+	73–76 C	70–72 C–
67–69 D+	60–66 D	0–59 F	

Grade Distribution

Assignments (4)	20%
Final Presentation	20%
Final Paper	50%
Participation	10%

Course Structure

The first thirteen weeks of the course will each involve reading one or two chapters or articles (see below) which will serve as the basis for critical discussion in the classroom. Students will be supplied with questions pertaining to the reading to help focus discussion. Time will also be devoted—in and outside of class—to listening to recordings and/or watching videos pertinent to the subject matter. As needed, class time will also be devoted to the introduction, review, and further modeling of analytical approaches and pertinent theories (e.g., theories of form).

Assignments

Brief essays (300–600 words) will be due during Weeks 3, 5, 7, and 9. The first essay will focus on the form of the scherzo from Florence Price's Piano Sonata in

E Minor. The second essay will focus on the idea of music as drama in an excerpt from Julia Perry's *The Cask of Amontillado*. Music-text relations in Undine Smith Moore's choral piece "Mother to Son" will be the subject of the third essay. In the final essay, students will be asked to write a response to the timbral and textural strategies of Erykah Badu's *Mama's Gun* album. Students' unique findings and interpretations will also serve as the basis for classroom discussion.

Final Presentation and Paper

The final paper (10–12 pages, double-spaced) will be on an analytical or critical topic of the students' choosing. Students will be encouraged to write about a piece or song by one of the many under-researched composers and artists discussed during the course. With the teacher's approval, students will have the option to broaden the course's focus to a sense of intersectionality that embraces other factors (e.g., sexuality). In such an event, however, students will acknowledge Crenshaw's (1991) sense of the term and consider how and why identity is relevant to the topic at hand. Students will also give 10-minute presentations on the subject of their final paper during Week 14. Students will meet one-on-one with the teacher during Week 10 to discuss the proposed topic of their presentation and final paper.

Assessment

Written work will be evaluated on a four-point scale in the following categories: strength and clarity of argument, citation of evidence from sources, demonstration of engagement with course concepts, length, and writing style. The final presentation will be evaluated on a four-point scale in the following categories: length, organization, effective use of examples, strength and clarity of argument, and demonstration of engagement with course concepts. Classroom participation will also be graded on a four-point scale.

Attendance and Participation Policy

Except in the case of excused absences, you are expected to attend every class and contribute to class discussions. I promise to begin and end class on time, in

order to be respectful of your time. If you anticipate being absent for any reason (excused or unexcused), please let me know ahead of time—even last-minute notice by e-mail is appreciated! Excused absences include tours, conferences, interviews, auditions, illnesses, and quarantine.

Notification of Changes

The instructor will make every effort to follow the guidelines of this syllabus as listed; however, the instructor reserves the right to amend this document as the need arises. In such instances, the instructor will notify students in class and/or via e-mail and will endeavor to provide reasonable time for students to adjust to any changes.

Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is not tolerated. University policy will be followed in a case where academic dishonesty occurs.

Students Who Learn Differently

Please contact me if you require special accommodations to maximize your performance in this course. This information is confidential.

Course Schedule

Week 1

Read:

Walker-Hill, Helen. "Introduction." In *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African American Women Composers and Their Music*, 1–49. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Hayes, Eileen M. "New Perspectives in Studies of Black Women and Music." In *Black Women and Music: More than the Blues*, edited by Eileen M. Hayes and Linda F. Williams, 1–20. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Discuss:

What are some of the reasons Walker-Hill and Hayes offer for why this subject area is needed? More than a decade has passed since these authors wrote the chapters we read; how has the passing of time affected the relevance of their observations, especially as applied to the study of music in a university setting?

Week 2

Read:

Maxile, Horace J., Jr. "Culture and Craft in Florence Price's Piano Sonata in E minor (First Movement)." In *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music, 1900–1960*, edited by Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft, 139–63. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Uhde, Katharina and R. Larry Todd. "'I'm Workin' on My Buildin': Freedom and Foundation-Building in Florence Price's Two Violin Fantasies." *Journal of the Society of American Music* 17, no. 3 (August 2023): 243–60.

Discuss:

What are some of the threads of history that Uhde and Todd trace throughout their article? The subject of the history in question might be a people, an individual, or an instrumental form or genre. How does Price represent the idea of "freedom" musically? How do the authors connect the music with Price's identity? The authors describe some aspects of Price's violin fantasies as strictly pertaining to her race, as evidenced by the following: "Using a sectional form, as is standard in many fantasies, she chose pre-

existing or newly composed tunes that either explicitly or implicitly interacted with Black musical idioms to anchor her music securely to 'an African-American folkloric heritage'" (p. 246). Do you agree or disagree that gender is not pertinent in these instances?

Why?

Watch:

The Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price. Directed by James Greeson.

Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015. 60 minutes.

<https://www.uapress.com/product/the-caged-bird/>.

Week 3

Complete Assignment #1:

Like Price's Violin Fantasies, the Scherzo movement from her Piano Sonata in E Minor (1932) segments into various sections. In 300–600 words, write an essay in which you analyze the form of this Scherzo. In addition to traditional means of segmentation (repetition and development; changes of key, meter, or tempo; theme types), comment on the role of Price's compositional traits, as revealed in Uhde and Todd's article. How do the presence or absence of elements such as the melodic use of the subtonic or accompanimental emphasis on off-beats help to differentiate formal sections?

Read:

Peters, Penelope. "Deep Rivers: Selected Songs of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds."

Canadian University Music Review 16, no. 1 (1995): 74–95.

Discuss:

In Penelope Peters's article "Deep Rivers: Selected Songs of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds," Peters states that "[Florence Price and Margaret Bonds] were faced with the dilemma of discovering a means of reconciling the musical traditions of their heritage with those of their training" (1995, 75). What element or elements does Peters identify as the solution to their dilemma?

Week 4

Listen to:

Florence Price's song "What do I care for Morning"

Discuss:

Discuss poet Helene Johnson's use of poetic irony in her poem "What do I care for Morning." How does Florence Price's setting of Johnson's poem support—or undermine—the poet's ironic stance? Consider the song's form and tonal structure. Additionally, discuss whether an intersectional framework sharpens your perception of Price's song. If not, why? If so, how?

Read:

Marlowe, Sarah and Charity Lofthouse. "Dreams Realized: Expression and Polystylism in the Art Song Settings of Langston Hughes's 'Dream Variation' by Florence Price and Margaret Bonds." *Music Theory Online* 31, no. 1 (March 2025).

https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.25.31.1/mto.25.31.1.marlowe_lofthouse.html

Week 5

Complete Assignment #2:

Joseph Kerman wrote that "Drama is or entails the revelation of the quality of human response to actions and events, in the direct context of those actions and events. Opera is drama when it furthers such revelations" (*Opera as Drama*, xiv). Focusing on the first scene (mm. 1–296) of Julia Perry's 1953 opera *The Cask of Amontillado*, identify a passage (up to approximately 80 measures) that is "dramatic" in Kerman's sense. In 300–600 words, discuss the passage, drawing support from the libretto, staging, and music as needed. Describe as specifically as possible the "quality of human response" suggested by the passage in question.

Discuss:

Teresa L. Reed observes that Julia Perry's compositional output includes both works in the "black idiom" and works that feature twentieth-century techniques ("Black Women in Art Music," in *Black Women and Music*, 192). Given this stylistic division, how might Reed classify Perry's *The Cask of Amontillado*? What historical forces and/or aesthetic trends may have influenced Perry's opera in this regard?

Read:

Leonard, Kendra Preston. "Teaching Julia Perry's *Homunculus C.F.*" In *Expanding the Canon*, edited by Melissa Hoag, 256–64. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Spinazzola, James. "Tania León (1943–)." In *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music: Nine American Composers*, edited by Michael K. Slayton, 251–98. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011.

Week 6

Read:

Davis, Angela. "I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity." In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, 3–41. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

Listen to:

"Crybaby" by Lizzo (2019)

"TEXAS HOLD 'EM" by Beyoncé (2024)

Discuss:

As a genre, the blues has waned considerably in popularity since its heyday in the 1920s and early 1930s. In general, it has not played a significant role in the musical output of either Beyoncé or Lizzo. Given such a context, why did these artists decide to use the blues in the two tracks under consideration? Do any of the lyrical themes touched on in these tracks call to mind the common themes Angela Davis observed in Classic Blues? How does each track depart harmonically from the prototypical 12-bar blues progression?

Tune in:

Slote, Audrey. "Nicole Mitchell's *Mandorla Awakening II* and the Sounds of Afrofuturist Theory." *SMT-Pod*, Season 4, Episode 12 (June 26, 2025). <https://smt-pod.org/episodes/season04/e4.12/>.

Week 7

Complete Assignment #3:

In 300–600 words, write an essay comparing Undine Smith Moore's choral setting of "Mother to Son" to Langston Hughes's spoken performance of his original poem.

Discuss at least one of the following: harmony, musical grammar (e.g., a cadence), or scales and modes (and their expressive connotations). Also discuss at least one of the

following: repetition of words and phrases, pacing, texture (especially the soloist's relation to the choir), or word-painting.

Read:

Heidemann, Kate. "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song." *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 1 (2016).

<https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.16.22.1/mto.16.22.1.heidemann.html>

Malawey, Victoria. "'Find Out What It Means to Me': Aretha Franklin's Gendered Re-authoring of Otis Redding's 'Respect.'" *Popular Music* 33, no. 2 (2014): 185–207.

Discuss:

What are some of the ways Aretha Franklin "re-authors" Otis Redding's "Respect," according to Malawey? Do you consider any of these details to be beyond the domain of music theory and analysis, and if so, why? What are some of the factors (musical or otherwise) that have contributed to this song's efficacy at promoting resistance?

Transcription is a powerful tool, especially considering that we may want to analyze music that only exists as an audio recording. That being said, what are some of the problems or dangers that accompany the use of transcription?

Week 8

Listen to:

Aretha Franklin's cover of The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby"

Discuss:

Compare Aretha Franklin's cover of "Eleanor Rigby" to The Beatles' original version. In particular, relate the tracks' use of stylistic markers to their lyrics. Consider also whether the track should be considered marked or unmarked with respect to the artists' overall output.

Read:

Hisama, Ellie M. "Voice, Race, and Sexuality in the Music of Joan Armatrading." In *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, edited by Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, 115–31. Los Angeles: Carciofoli, 1999.

Week 9

Complete Assignment #4:

Select two tracks from Erykah Badu's 2000 album *Mama's Gun*. In 300–600 words, compare both the various timbres and textures used on each track, as well as the tracks' lyrical themes. Speculate briefly about what an investigation into the relationship between timbre and either form or groove in the tracks in question would reveal. Comment on the role that positionality plays in the lyrics of each track.

Read:

Burns, Lori and Mélisse Lafrance. "Me'Shell Ndegéocello, 'Mary Magdalene' (1996)." In *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity & Popular Music*, 133–67. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Discuss:

How does Me'Shell Ndegéocello's song "Mary Magdalene" "reread, reinterpret, [or] reconfigure" a dominant cultural text? To what extent is Ndegéocello successful in this effort? How does this theme manifest itself in the song's formal characteristics?

Week 10

During this week, students will meet one-on-one with the teacher to discuss their proposed topic for the final presentation and paper.

Read:

Danielsen, Anne. "Metrical Ambiguity or Microrhythmic Flexibility? Analysing Groove in 'Nasty Girl' by Destiny's Child." In *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*, edited by Ralf von Appen, Dietrich Helms, and Allan F. Moore, 53–71. Burlington: Ashgate, 2015.

James, Robin. "Interlude C: How Not to Listen to *Lemonade*: Music Criticism and Epistemic Violence." In *The Lemonade Reader*, edited by Kinitra D. Brooks and Kameelah L. Martin, 69–76. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Watch:

Beyoncé. "Formation." Directed by Melina Matsoukas. February 6, 2016, music video, 4:48. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV_bQ&list=RDWDZJPJV_bQ&start_radio=1

Discuss:

Robin James writes that “Aesthetic practices can communicate and perform knowledges that reinforce systems of domination, and they can also communicate and perform subordinate knowledges that map out strategies for survival amid domination” (2019, p. 74). How might we analyze such aesthetic practices? To take Beyoncé’s “Formation” as an example, where in this cultural product do we locate the “subordinate knowledge” it communicates? What discursive possibilities are enabled by such an analytical undertaking?

Week 11

Read:

Palfy, Cora S. “Formal Structures and Narrative Design in Janelle Monáe’s *The ArchAndroid*.” In *Expanding the Canon*, edited by Melissa Hoag, 163–77. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Watch:

Monáe, Janelle. “Janelle Monáe talks ‘Pynk’ Pants, Prince and Afrofuturism.” Interview by Christine Kakaire. Berlin: Red Bull Music Festival, September 25, 2018.
<https://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/lectures/janelle-monae>.

Discuss:

What are some of the musical features that Palfy highlights in Janelle Monáe’s album *The ArchAndroid*? How do these musical features relate to the work’s narrative design? What are some of the sociological relationships alluded to through the allegory set forth in this work?

Week 12

Read:

Abrahams, Rosa. “Structural Shifts and Identity in Music by Ester Rada.” In *Expanding the Canon*, edited by Melissa Hoag, 201–11. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Desinord, Richard. “Harmonizing Uncertainty: Ambiguous Tonicizations in the Music of Summer Walker.” In *Modeling Musical Analysis*, edited by Kim Loeffert and John Peterson, 288–95. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024.

Discuss:

How is Ester Rada's positionality similar to—and different from—the other composers and artists we have examined in this course? What connections does Abrahams draw between Rada's identity and her music? What music theory concepts are critical for Abrahams's argument in her chapter?

Week 13

Read:

Berry, Venise T. "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music." In *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, edited by Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, 183–201. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994.

Wallmark, Zachary. "Analyzing Vocables in Rap: A Case Study of Megan Thee Stallion" *Music Theory Online* 28, no. 2 (June 2022).

<https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.22.28.2/mto.22.28.2.wallmark.html>

Listen to:

"Ladies First" by Queen Latifah (feat. Monie Love).

Discuss:

The lyrics of Queen Latifah and Monie Love's "Ladies First" address openly the quality of the rappers' rhymes and flow. Using the song as its own aesthetic yardstick, what are some of the details in the design of the rapping that the artists likely prize? Given rap's position in relation to other styles and genres throughout the history of music, what challenges and opportunities does it present for the framework pursued in this course?

Week 14

During this week, students will deliver 10-minute presentations on the subject of their final presentation. The final paper will be due at the end of the semester.

Additional Sources

- Briscoe, James R., ed. *Contemporary Anthology of Music by Women*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Brooks, Daphne A. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Standard Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–99.
- Ege, Samantha. *South Side Impresarios: How Race Women Transformed Chicago's Classical Music Scene*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024.
- Green, Mildred Denby. "A Study of the Lives and Works of Five Black Women Composers." PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1975.
- Patterson, Willis C., ed. *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*. New York: E. B. Marks Music Corporation, 1977.