

**Undergraduate Seminar**  
**History of Music Theory: Global Approaches and Perspectives**

**Thomas Christensen, Lester Hu, and Carmel Raz**

**Cover Letter**

Now is an exciting moment to be teaching music theory! As a result of many fundamental changes both within the discipline and without, our field is opening itself up as never before to musical practices outside of the traditional European/North American framework, including a study of their attendant music theories. At the same time, undergraduate student bodies at North American institutions continue to reflect changing demographics and global interconnections, so that students themselves are bringing increasingly diverse traditions of musical knowledge and globally shaped musical interests into our music theory classroom. As a result, many instructors, ourselves included, have found themselves inspired to redesign courses that are relevant to this new, expanded perspective.

The “global turn” in music theory, as it is commonly termed, offers scholars and students many exciting new challenges and opportunities. Above all, it prompts us to reconsider fundamental questions about the nature and aims of music theory. For students being educated in most Western institutions, encounters with the thought and “theory” of musical cultures on a global scale can be as exciting and disorienting as encounters with the music itself. However, in our experiences attempting to introduce aspects of global music theory into an undergraduate curriculum, we discovered that one of the biggest roadblocks has been the dearth of easily accessible primary sources by which this global music theory can be represented. This is because the musical thought of many musical cultures, both past and present, are not necessarily accessed through familiar texts and treatises that are typically the medium for conveying music theory in the West (though to be sure, there are a large number of such textual traditions). For many historical cultures of music without literate traditions, theoretical ideas and pedagogies were usually communicated orally. But for many more past historical cultures, we may only have material artefacts, musical instruments, and images as evidence for recovering their musical knowledge. Together, these can all be considered as alternative “sources” for conveying and understanding music theory on a global scale when carefully curated and analyzed.

We have therefore designed this upper-level undergraduate course on the history of music theory that takes as its core course materials a portfolio of twenty-five diverse and newly translated and/or curated primary sources of global music “thinking.” These range from nineteenth-century Indonesian palm leaf manuscripts to medieval mbira keys, from Hebrew-language Guidonian hands to eighteenth-century indigenous Bolivian solfeggio notations, from ancient Akkadian ritual instructions to twentieth-century ethnographic reports.

The quarter-length ten-week course is organized into three units. It first begins by presenting major concepts surrounding “globality” (Week 1–4). Here, we introduce students to current arguments surrounding global history, the benefits and challenges of incorporating global perspectives in the study of music, and the debate on “ethnotherapy” as a particularly salient problem in cross-cultural study. It then acquaints students with various forms of music theorizing and musical knowledge (Weeks 5–8). After expanding their appreciation of what can constitute a “source” of musical knowledge, the student is then ready to think about non-textual and non-discursive traditions of musical theorizing involving musical instruments, “embodied” knowledge, and non-canonic forms of writing. The course concludes with an exploration of the sociopolitical work of music theory (Weeks 9–10).

We have selected the readings to acquaint students with key debates in the field of global history and indigenous studies as well as the history of music theory. Each week, the assigned secondary sources are accompanied by a selection of primary source entries designed to provoke, expand, and problematize the issues raised by those readings. The entries are listed as reading for the Tuesday class, but we intend them to be discussed during both class meetings. The questions to be addressed by the student presentations are likewise intended to destabilize received notions of what music theory is and what it can be. To be more concrete, we regard the course as encouraging the following pedagogical goals:

- 1) Introduce students to a global history of music theory.
- 2) Familiarize students with many traditions of music theory of the world through direct engagement with primary sources.
- 3) Expand received notions of what music theory can be as forms and traditions of knowledge.
- 4) Engage critically with the ethics and challenges of cross-cultural study.
- 5) Familiarize students with music theory as a form of intellectual inquiry and an academic field.

We believe this syllabus makes a significant contribution to our field’s current rethinking of the history and pedagogy of music theory. By offering students the opportunity to engage with a wide range of primary sources both in terms of content and in terms of form—most of which have rarely, if ever, been taught in undergraduate classrooms—we hope to empower them to question and reimagine what “music theory” itself entails. We are excited to share this syllabus as a step toward broadening both the pedagogy and the scope of our discipline.

**Tags:** Artisanal Skills, Embodied Knowledge, Global Histories of Music Theory, Global History, History of Music Theory, Images, Instruments, Interviews, Origin Myths, Primary Sources Stories, Texts, Tools

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**Overview**

If music-making is a ubiquitous human activity, so is the urge to wonder about music. Across countless geographically and temporally distinct cultures, we find evidence (even if only tantalizing traces) that whenever music is made, it also generates reflection. As musicking people, we seem ever curious to know and teach how music is made, indeed, what it is made of. We marvel how it can possess such mysterious power to affect us: to induce trance; provoke epiphanies; heal physical, psychic, or social ills; inflame or quiet the passions; or enhance social bonds. The insights afforded by such reflection have been instrumental in shaping metaphysics, religion, ethics, cosmology, science, and even politics around the globe. In short, wherever there is music, there has been *music theory*, one that can be conceived generously, capaciously, and humanely.

In this seminar, we will examine how notions of music theory can be found not only in historical texts, but through the study of more ephemeral sources such as ancient musical instruments excavated by archeologists, in oral histories gathered by ethnographers, and by hermeneutic analysis of visual and other iconographic evidence from civilizations dating back seven millennia and across six continents. Students will have a chance to identify, select and analyze for themselves such alternative sources of music theory as a final class project.

**Target Audience**

Upper level undergraduate music majors, no prerequisites

**Attendance**

The success of this seminar depends on your participation and input. We expect that you will attend every meeting of the seminar, but do let us know if you have special circumstances (e.g., illness, difficult life events) that affect your ability to participate, and we will find a solution.

**Classroom Protocols and Expectations**

Over the course of the quarter, we will discuss and critically engage a number of assigned readings. Most readings will be articles or chapters drawn from various scholarly sources that relate to the week's theme. Additional readings will be entries drawn from the *Thinking Music* publication now in production (You'll learn more about that project in the second week of class.)

**Course Materials**

The required textbook for this course is *Thinking Music: Global Sources for the History of Music Theory*, edited by Thomas Christensen, Lester Hu, and Carmel Raz (University of Chicago OPS, 2026). This digital, open-access book is currently available only in beta form. For the time being, all readings will be made available as pdfs.

You will notice that many of the weekly entries do not directly match the traditions being discussed in the secondary literature. This is intentional. The goal is for you to draw and create new connections and lines of thought between the issues raised in the secondary literature and the ideas explored in the entries. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind throughout the entire semester that there are far more sources of music-theoretical knowledge than secondary literatures in the English language. Addressing this problem is part of the seminar's *raison d'être*, after all!

### **Be Prepared!**

You should come to class prepared to discuss these readings in detail; defend, critique, and qualify interpretations of them; and engage in productive dialogue concerning related issues.

### **Discussion Leaders**

Each week some of you will lead a discussion of one of the readings. This will require you to do a little bit of digging into the text, and perhaps some background research as well. Come prepared with some remarks and discussion prompts so you can lead a discussion with the class for about 15 to 20 minutes.

### **Short Presentations**

You will be responsible for two short presentations over the course of the semester that address the questions posed in the box inserts below.

### **Final Paper**

Your final paper will comprise a source analysis modeled on the entries you will be reading from *Thinking Music*. Your basic task is to select some historical text, artifact, iconography, or ethnographic report that you feel represents or implies a kind of musical theorization. Your analysis might involve translation, depending on the source you chose. In week 8, we will be asking you to submit a **short proposal** for 3 potential sources that you would consider writing on. We will set up individual meetings with you that week to discuss them and help you select one for your final project, due by the end of the semester. There will be no final exam.

### **Evaluation Rubric:**

- Discussion leader – 20%  
Your summary of the readings and the discussion questions you prepare
- Classroom performance – 20%  
Your regular constructive contributions to classroom discussions.
- Short Presentations – 20%  
Your short presentations in response to two assigned prompts.
- Final project – 40%  
Factors considered include (but are not limited to) treatment of the topic, critical insight, quality of writing, and style.

### **Academic Integrity**

Plagiarized work, including work written by Chat GPT, earns you an F (numerically a zero, not a 55) on the given assignment, and a report filed to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Affairs. We're always happy to field citation questions if you are unsure about something.

## Planned Course Schedule and Readings

### Week 1: A Short Introduction to Global History

#### Tuesday:

Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, “Approaches to Global Intellectual History,” in S. Moyn and A. Sartori, eds. *Global Intellectual History* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 3–32.  
 Stefanie Gänger and Jürgen Osterhammel, “Introduction: Rethinking History, Globally,” in S. Gänger and J. Osterhammel, eds. *Rethinking Global History* (Cambridge University Press), 1–19.

#### Thursday:

Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Chapter 1,” from *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 3–46.

### Week 2. The Global Turn in Music History — Defining “globality” and “music history”

#### Tuesday:

Martin Stokes, “Notes and Queries on ‘Global Music History,’” in *Studies on a Global History of Music: A Balzan Musicology Project*, Reinhard Strohm ed. (Routledge, 2018), 3–18.

#### Thinking Music Entries — what can “music theory” be?

- I Gde Made Indra Sadguna and Elizabeth A. Clendinning, “early 19th c.: Prakēmpa”
- Andrew Cashner, “Athanasius Kircher presents the arca musarithmica (1650)”
- Kay Shelemay, “*Məḷəkkəṭ*: Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church Notation”

#### Thursday:

Olivia Bloechl and Hyun Kyong Hannah Chang (convenors), et al., “Colloquy: Theorizing Global Music History,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023): 831–72.

### Week 3. A Global History of Music Theory? Defining music theory and pedagogy

#### Tuesday:

Gabriela Currie and Lars Christensen, “Chapter 4: The Western Regions: Kucha,” in *Eurasian Musical Journeys: Five Tales* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 38–49.

#### Thinking Music Entries — “globality” as mobility:

- Alexandre Cerveux, “Transcription of the Guidonian hand in a sixteenth-century Hebrew manuscript of music theory”
- Roger M. Grant, “c. 1720–1767: solfège syllables used in music notation by Indigenous musicians in Chiquitania [Bolivia], South America”

- Richard David Williams, “1885: Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay’s insights and confusions from European scholarship”

**Thursday:**

Alexander Rehding, “Fine-Tuning a Global History of Music Theory: Divergences, Zhu Zaiyu, and Music-Theoretical Instruments,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 44, no. 2 (2022): 260–275.

**Presentation 1:**

*What is music theory as an academic field?* You have all studied music theory as a body of technical knowledge facilitating your command, largely, of European classical music. But what do scholars of music theory study? Research and give a short presentation on what music theorists do. You may want to find information in the different music theory/music departments across the country, or the Society for Music Theory. You may even reach out to graduate students in our department pursuing advanced degrees in music theory! FOR EXTRA CREDIT, you may also research what music theorists in non-North American or even non-Anglophone worlds do.

**Week 4. The Ethnomusicology and “Ethnotheory” Debate**

**Tuesday:**

Stephen Blum, “Chapter 1: Ethnomusicologists and Music Theory,” in *Music Theory in Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 5–29.

**Thinking Music Entries — Ethnotheory, or theoretical extraction?**

- Kwasi Ampene, “Akan Ivory Trumpets.”
- Donna Buchanan, “Makamliisko.”
- Jessie M. Vallejo, “Otavalan Transverse Flutes and Gendered Expressions in Kichwa Music and Dance”

**Thursday:**

Kofi Agawu, “Against Ethnotheory.” In Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Jonathan Dunsby & Jonathan Goldman (eds.), *The Dawn of Music Semiology: Essays in Honor of Jean-Jacques Nattiez*. (University of Rochester Press, 2017), 38–58.

Ana María Ochoa Gautier, “The Aural Industrial Extractivist Global Complex,” *Resonance* 5, no. 4 (2024), 324–33.

## Week 5. What is a Source of Music Theory? Discursivity versus orality.

### Tuesday:

Thomas Christensen, “Fragile Texts, Hidden Theory,” (second revised edition), in *The Work of Music Theory. Selected Essays* (London: Ashgate Press, 2014), 55–73.

### Thinking Music Entries — What makes something a “source”?

- Ginger Dellenbaugh, “1797 CE: Colin Campbell invents a written notation system for the Highland bagpipe from an oral tradition.”
- Luis Ferreira, “1888: Uruguayan historian Isidoro De María recalls the music and dance of Africans in Montevideo sixty years before.”
- Uri Gabbay, “Second century BCE. Akkadian ritual instructions for covering the *lilissu* kettledrum with the hide of a bull.”

### Thursday:

Gary Tomlinson, “Chapter 2: Metonymy, writing, and the matter of Mexica song,” in *The Singing of the New World: Indigenous Voice in the Era of European Contact* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28–49.

Jessica Bissett Perea, “Chapter 1: Sounds Archives of Presence,” *Sound Relations: Native Ways of Doing Music History in Alaska* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 37–55.

## Week 6. Instruments of Music Theory

### Tuesday:

Alex Rehding, “Three Music-Theory Lessons,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 141, no. 2 (2016): 251–282.

### Thinking Music Entries — Objects theorizing music

- Gérard Borrás, Martín Mamani Quispe, & Henry Stobart, “Tuputisi (medidas) – instrument makers’ measuring sticks in the Bolivian Andes: Archiving an aesthetic world.”
- Luca Mukhavele, “Music-theoretical Implications of the Mbira Nyunganyunga.”
- Joshua Kumbani and Martin Scherzinger, “A mbira key from the Later Iron Age (1000–1700 CE) is excavated at the medieval city of Great Zimbabwe.”

### Thursday:

Sheryl Chow, “A Localised Boundary Object: Seventeenth-Century Western Music Theory in China.” *Early Music History* 39 (2020): 75–113.

### Presentation 2:

*Is this music theory?* Present a small object, image, and/or practice that you think raises the question of “is this music theory?” Reflect not just on whether you think it

is or is not music theory, but also the broader implications should it be considered “music theory” or not.

## Week 7. Music Theory and/as Embodied Knowledge

### Tuesday:

Dagmar Schäfer, Chapter 6 “Acoustics,” in *The Crafting of the 10,000 Things: Knowledge and Technology in Seventeenth-Century China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 203–229.

### *Thinking Music Entries — Different kinds of knowledge (and knowledge-bearers):*

- Lester Hu, “How Zhu Zaiyu had his epiphany over twelve-tone equal temperament”
- Richard Moyle, “An Alyawarra choral song performance reveals implicit formal awareness”
- Rainer Polak, “West-African Dance Circles and Choreo-Music Analysis”

### Thursday:

Robert Gjerdingen, “Artisanal knowledge as a cognate music theory: Reading a partimento.” In *Cognate Music Theories*, Ignacio Prats-Arolas, ed. (Routledge, 2024), 74–87.

### Proposal due:

*Take it away!* Identify 3 primary sources that you might be interested in writing about. Your proposal should outline the content and significance of each source and explain the specific questions you hope to answer in your entry. We will set up individual meetings after you submit your proposal to help you choose which source to focus on and better define the scope of your entry. We will also spend some of our class time discussing best practices in translation and editing from both theoretical-ethical and practical angles.

## Week 8. Implicit Theory

### Tuesday:

Marc Perlman, Chapter 5: “Theorizing Melodic Guidance: The Social and Historical Context of Javanese Music Theory,” in *Unplayed Melodies: Javanese Gamelan and the Genesis of Music Theory* (University of California Press, 2004), 117–126.

### *Thinking Music Entries — How can theory be non-discursive?*

- Robert Bagley, “Mid fifth century BCE: Inscribed sets of 65 bells and 41 chime stones from the court of Marquis Yi of Zeng unearthed in 1978 at Suizhou in Hubei province.”
- Alexander Herrera, “1st c. BCE – 9th c. CE: Clay-modelled waylla kepa shell horn from Shillcop cemetery (Yungay, Peru).”



- Nina Baratti, “Ca. 1750 CE: Capuchin Mission Images Reveal the Central Role of Marimba Players in the Royal Courts of Early Modern Kongo and Angola.”

#### Thursday:

Jonathan de Souza, “Guitar Thinking,” *Soundboard Scholar* 7.1 (2021)

<https://doi.org/10.56902/SBS.2021.7.7>.

Anna Yu Wang, “Philosophizing Time in Sinitic Opera,” *MTO* 29, no. 3 (2023)

<https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.23.29.3/mto.23.29.3.yuwang.html>

### Week 9. Cultural Ideologies and Music Theory

#### Tuesday:

Henry Stobart, “Reflections on Andean Sonorities,” *Flower World-Mundo Florido: Music Archaeology of the Americas-Arqueomusicologia de las Americas*, 7 (2023): 19–50.

#### *Thinking Music Entries — How do ideologies play out?*

- José Pérez De Arce A. “‘Pifilka’ Flutes: The Construction of a Complex Sound System in the Southern Andes.”
- Daniel K. S. Walden, “1844/1852: Johanna Kinkel calls for the emancipation of the quartertone.”

#### Thursday:

Erica Fox Brindley, “Ch. 3 Regulating Sound and the Cosmos” *Music, Cosmology, and the Politics of Harmony in Early China* (SUNY Press, 2012), 63–88.

### Week 10. Music Theory and Governance

#### Tuesday:

Parkorn Wangpaiboonkit, “On Offering Oneself to Music History: Positionalities and Perspectives from Colonial Siam.” *The Journal of Musicology* 4, no. 3 (2023): 275–283.

#### *Thinking Music Entries — Music theory regulating music (and much more)*

- Robert Provine, “Tuned bronze bells set P’yŏnjong in Korea, for court music”
- Henry Stobart and Fortunato Lauro, “Musical calendars: Structuring time and productive cycles in the Bolivian Andes.”

#### Thursday:

Kailan R. Rubinoff, “Toward a Revolutionary Model of Music Pedagogy: The Paris Conservatoire, Hugot and Wunderlich’s *Méthode de flute*, and the Disciplining of the Musician,” *Journal of Musicology* 34, no. 4 (2017): 473–514.