Cover Letter: Embodied Music Theory

In "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem," Suzanne G. Cusick pinpoints the mind/body disjuncture as a critical site for reimagining what music theory might look like. She notes that in conventional anglophone music theory,

> the composer has come to be understood to be *mind—mind* that creates patterns of sounds to which other *minds* assign meanings … Thus, when we think analytically about music, what we ordinarily do is describe practices of the mind (the composer's choices) for the sake of informing the practices of other minds (who will assign meaning to the resulting sounds) … ignoring the fact that these practices of the mind are nonpractices without the bodily practices they call for" (Cusick 1994, 16; emphasis in original).

Drawing from the work of scholars in a range of music studies, this proposed syllabus represents one attempt to answer Cusick's call for music theory approaches that "restore a recognition of the body's actual contribution to the web of meanings understood by the word music" in addition to its more typical role "offering us a set of practices to analyze the syntax and structure of works' textlike qualities" (ibid., 21-22).

This course has five key goals:

- To counter what has been critiqued as "pitch centrism" (Fales 2002) in music analysis, highlighting pedagogical systems focused on other elements of music
- To introduce the body an entry point for exploring questions of race, gender, and dis/ability as they relate to music theory
- To present a range of the world's musics in a different format than the geographic survey
- To juxtapose readings and music examples in ways that emphasize shared qualities among geographically or temporally distant music – for example, by discussing the relationship between dance and sonic syntax in both the minuet and the Ghanaian form Adowa, or parallels between svaras and solfege
- To help students connect music-theoretical understanding to other fields, such as performance studies and cultural studies, demonstrating the broader value and diverse potential applications of music theory knowledge

In approaching these goals, I explore some of the many bodily movements linked to music—dance, gesture, performance technique, and imitative vocal sounds—as analytically-inflected forms of practice with the potential to reveal important information about music's formal qualities. In some languages, "music" and "dance" are represented with the same word (Agawu 2016), highlighting musical sound's close relationship to movement. Even in the performance of so-called "pure" music, those of us who have experience as instrumentalists are aware of how visual and performance-based approaches to theory—score analysis vs. scale and arpeggio exercises, for example—can reinforce one another in our musical understanding.

I approach the teaching of music theory not as simply an applied practice that exists "downstream" from the production of scholarly texts, but as a domain in which teachers are continuously engaged in innovative translation processes that reveal important insights about music-theoretical principles. This course is particularly indebted to the work of scholars in the

Society to Connect Education and Research in Japanese Music[1] (Tokumaru et al. 2019), who developed a pedagogical model centered on what David Hughes (2000) has described in English as "acoustic-iconic mnemonic systems," found in a vast range of global performing arts. Perhaps due to the persistent feminization of teaching as a profession (Cortina and Román 2006), these syllable systems have received comparatively little attention in music theory scholarship, despite their potential for revealing a wealth of knowledge about how musicians theorize timbre, rhythm, and performance technique.

This course responds to pitch-centered forms of analysis which currently form the core of the North American music theory curriculum, and as such assumes students will arrive in the classroom with a familiarity with Roman numeral analysis and solfege. However, each class meeting incorporates generally only a single reading (occasionally two); this allows for supplementation depending on an instructor's needs, which may include more background on the history of solmization in Europe, for example. Instructors in a liberal arts environment could incorporate additional readings on cultural studies, critical theory, and postcolonial studies for a more humanities bent, or with readings on music cognition and quantitative music analysis for students in STEM-dominant contexts. The course is structured to encourage student exploration and connection with local music communities, particularly the final student-led individual presentations; in a similar vein, the workshop on *shōga* koto syllables could be replaced by a guest lecture or workshop by local music practitioners (one alternative might be taiko drumming, which also uses mnemonic syllable systems in its pedagogy and is widely popular in North America.) It also draws extensively from open-access online materials, taking advantage of the wealth of music and scholarship available in the streaming era. Students are encouraged to connect music-theoretical understanding to forms of creative practice in their everyday lives, rather than approaching the field as the memorization of a set of fixed syntactic principles handed down from theorists on high.

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References

Agawu, Kofi. 2016. *The African Imagination in Music*. Oxford University Press.

Cortina, Regina, and Sonsoles San Román. 2006. *Women and Teaching: Global Perspectives on the Feminization of a Profession*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Cusick, Suzanne G. 1994. "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem." *Perspectives of New Music* 32(1): 8-27.

Fales, Cornelia. 2002. "The Paradox of Timbre." *Ethnomusicology* 46 (1): 56-95.

Hughes, David W. 2000. "No Nonsense: The Logic and Power of Acoustic-Iconic Mnemonic Systems." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9(2): 93-120.

Tokumaru, Yoshihiko, et al. 2019. *Shōga de manabu nihon ongaku* [Learning Japanese Music through Mnemonic Syllables]. Ongaku no tomosha.

Appendix: Worksheet and answer key for workshop on mnemonic syllables in Japanese koto music

[1] 日本音楽の教育と研究をつなぐ会, https://tsunagu-japanesemusic.blogspot.com/

Embodied Music Theory

Instructor: Garrett Groesbeck (ggroesbeck@wesleyan.edu)

FA2026 M/Th

Overview

Is twerking a form of music analysis? How about stimming, the repetition of particular gestures and/or vocal sounds? How has music been analyzed visually without using sheet music? In this course, we push the boundaries of what is typically understood as "music theory" by focusing on the crucial role of the body in music making. We will explore a number of contemporary popular and historical traditions, examining music's relationship to bodily movements such as gesture, choreography, performance technique, and vocal imitation. In doing so, we aim to expand whose knowledge gets to count as "music theory." This is a special topics course for upper-level undergraduate students in a range of music studies. It is intended to complement forms of analysis focused on harmonic function, counterpoint, melody, and form, and students should arrive with a basic familiarity with Roman numeral analysis and solfege (Schenkerian or post-tonal analysis are not required).

Reading and listening materials

Any reading and listening materials that are not available online open-access can be found in the library's digital reserve system.

Assessment

25% - Attendance and participation
20% - Discussion responses (1 per unit; the lowest score will be dropped)
20% - Midterm presentation (group)
20% - Final presentation (individual)
15% - Reading quizzes (4 total; the lowest score will be dropped)

Reading quizzes

Students should arrive in class having completed the listening and viewing assignments listed for that day. We will have regular reading quizzes throughout the term. Quizzes will be open-note (handwritten notes only, except with accommodation in conversation with the instructor and the accessibility office). There will be no gotcha questions – the main goal is to support students in being prepared for engaging class discussions.

Discussion responses

Each unit includes a "choose your own response" assignment, which involves individual research to find an example for class discussion. Submissions should be uploaded to the CMS, and should include a 250-300 word description; details on each of the assignments can be found below.

Midterm presentation: kinetic analysis

In groups, you will work to perform an analysis of a musical work 3-5 minutes in length. It may be one of our class listening assignments or a different musical work or excerpt (subject to instructor approval). Your analysis may include gestures such as choreography or hand movements; it may also incorporate the use of props, colors, costumes, video, or live drawing.

This analysis should reveal something about the structure of the music. It should **not** be a free interpretation: movements should be connected to particular musical sounds or patterns in consistent ways. Following the presentation, by the beginning of the next class meeting, your group should submit a 1000-word response that addresses the following points:

- What aspects of the music your analysis highlights or reveals
- How you assigned particular kinetic signals to particular musical sounds
- Challenges you faced in negotiating your analytical system
- Whether you felt the performance successfully conveyed the information you hoped
- How you would change your performance in future iterations

Final Presentation: Comparing Mnemonic Syllable Systems
For the final week of class, students will present individually on one of the following systems of non-lexical syllables used in music pedagogy: ***shōga* in Japanese musics**, **gu-eum in Korean musics**, **South Asian rhythmic systems (solkattu or bol)**, **scat singing**, **canntaireachd in bagpipe music**, **drum vocables in gamelan**, **drum vocables in Ewe music**, or another example of your own choosing, with instructor approval. You will conduct individual research to learn more about how it works and what it means to practitioners. This research could include comparison of performances available online, searching for academic publications, or speaking to practitioners directly (either locally or remotely). Your final presentation should teach us:

- Which aspects of the music these syllables describe or imitate
- The degree to which they are formalized
    - Is improvisation allowed?
    - Do different performers use the same syllables in disparate ways?
- How your chosen syllables compare and contrast with solfege

Class Schedule

Unit 1 – Gesture, Movement, and Games

Week 1: Setting the Stage

M:
Syllabus overview, instructor and student introductions
Reading strategies; context for Cusick and Small

Th:
Reading

- Cusick, Suzanne G. 1994. "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem." *Perspectives of New Music* 32 (1): 8-27.
- Small, Christopher. 1998. "Prelude: Music and Musicking," in *Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening*.

Listening

- Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn, Trio in D Minor, Op. 11.

Week 2: Dancing Music Theory

M:

Reading

- Sánchez-Kisielewska, Olga. "Choreomusical Analogies in the Symphonic Minuet." *Music Theory Online* 32(2): https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.26.32.2/mto.26.32.2.sanchez-kisielewska.html.

Listening

- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Symphony in D K. 202, *Menuetto*

Th:

Reading

- Agawu, Kofi. 2016. "Music in/and Society," in *The African Imagination in Music*.
- Díaz, Juan Diego. 2024. "From Clave Ethnotheory to Clave Theories: A Path Toward Decolonizing Musical Analysis." *Ethnomusicology* 68(2): 218-246.

Viewing

- Yeboah Agyei, "Adowa," https://youtu.be/iu5qF1a7VyI?si=F6SLqfYJNrXHmkto

**Reading quiz #1

Week 3: Games, rhythm, and play – our earliest introductions to music analysis

M:

Reading

- Gaunt, Kyra D. 2006. "Mary Mack Dressed in Black: The Earliest Formation of a Popular Music," in *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*.

Listening

- Rufus Thomas, "Walking the Dog," 1964.

Th:

Reading

- Miller, Kiri. 2017. "Practice, Practice, Practice," in *Playable Bodies: Dance Games and Intimate Media*.

Submission

- Choose your own response: by the beginning of class Thursday, find one video example of a rhythm game on Youtube or other publicly available site and upload it to the course LMS. Include a 250-300 word description of the game's mechanisms: how does it cue rhythm or other musical parameters? In our discussion, we will watch some examples submitted by students and approach these games as a form of "hybrid notation," as Miller describes.

Unit 2 – Technology and the Body in Music Theory

Week 4: Music Technology and Visual Analysis

M:
Reading

- Gardner, Samuel and Nicholas J. Shea. 2022. "Gestural Perspectives on Popular Music Performance." *Music Theory Online* 28(3): https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.22.28.3/mto.22.28.3.gardnershea.html.

Viewing

- Imogen Heap, "Imogen Heap's Mi.Mu gloves will 'change the way we make music,'" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ci-yB6EgVW4.
- Ok Go, "This Too Shall Pass," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qybUFnY7Y8w.

Th:
Reading

- Hospelhorn, Emma, and Josh Radinsky. 2017. "Method for Analyzing Gestural Communication in Musical Groups." *Discourse Processes* 54(7): 504-523.

Viewing

- Lara Pearson, "Alapana - Four views of movement in Carnatic music," available on Vimeo.

**Reading quiz #2

Week 5: Music Theory and the Disabled Body

M:
Reading/viewing

- Adams, Kate. "Sounding Out the S/M/Othering: Turning an Ethnomusicological Ear to Musicking amongst People with Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities (PIMD)." *Rising Voices in Ethnomusicology* 21(2): https://risingvoicesjournal.com/212-adams.

Th:
Reading

- Saslaw, Jan. "Methods for Teaching Music Theory to Visually Impaired Students." *Music Theory Online* 15 (3-4): np. https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.09.15.3/mto.09.15.3.saslaw.html

Submission

- Choose your own response: Searching online, find one example of an adaptive or assistive technology for musicians with disabilities. This could be an example of software additions, such as accessible approaches to the Reaper DAW, or hardware, such as SkoogMusic. Upload a link where we can learn more about this technology to the CMS, and include a 250-300word description answering the following questions:
    - What are its primary goals? How does it function?
    - Has it been used in music classrooms or in live performance?
    - How might it be used to help understand music theory?

Week 6: Putting the Pieces Together

M:
Reading

- Mead, Virginia Hoge. 1996. "More than Mere Movement: Dalcroze Eurhythmics." *Music Educators Journal* 82(4): 38-41.

Viewing

- Lisa Parker, "Dalcroze Eurythmics," https://youtu.be/wEyyeoc_t-U?si=9eWzeUjX8MYevMBf

By this point in the semester we have studied a number of ways of expressing information about music that do not involve staff notation: this includes things like chanting and clapping, choreography, gesture, and video game UIs. In today's class, we will make groups and begin strategizing your midterm presentations. By the end of class today, your group should have (1) selected the piece of music you will be analyzing, and (2) begun strategizing your Kinetic Analysis performance.

Th:

Midterm project presentations: kinetic analysis

Unit 3 – Voicing the Body: Music, Language, and Imitation

Week 7: Mnemonic Syllable Systems Part 1 – More than Pitch

M:

Reading

- Hughes, David W. 2000. "No Nonsense: The Logic and Power of Acoustic-Iconic Mnemonic Systems." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9 (2): 93-120.

Viewing

- Eien Hunter-Ishikawa, "Kuchishoga," https://youtu.be/oC3sCdk_T14?si=GeOMCN3cLKvYpWWU

Submission

- Kinetic analysis description (1000 words, coauthored as a group)

Today's class will feature a workshop on *shōga* syllables in Japanese koto music, analyzing an excerpt from "Rokudan no Shirabe" [**Appendix**]

Th:

Reading

- Fleet, Paul. 2017. "Rethinking the Guidonian Hand for Twenty-First Century Musicians." *Journal of Popular Music Education* 1(2): 199-213. https://doi.org/10.1386/jpme.1.2.199_1.

Viewing

- Pratibha Sarathy (VoxGuru), "Introduction to Carnatic Music" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnObqYfb-0M
- Pratibha Sarathy (VoxGuru), "How to Sing Gamakas" https://youtu.be/AIPraIlSmIk?si=Azn46dSJlPtkheHC

**Reading quiz #3

Week 8: Mnemonic Syllable Systems Part 2 – Rhythm, Timbre, and Performance Technique

M:

Reading

- Wood, Brandon Keith. 2013. "South Indian Solkattu and Western Music Pedagogy: Creating New Rhythmic Perspectives." *Music Educators Journal* 99 (4): 63-67.

Viewing

- Kuljit Bhamra, "What is a taal (tala)?" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFuQmBARQsQ

Th:

Reading

- Bauer, William R. 2002. "Scat Singing: A Timbral and Phonemic Analysis." *Current Musicology* (71-73): 303-323.

Viewing/Listening

- Michael Mwenso and Brianna Thomas, "Exploring Jazz Vocals and Scat Singing," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHcnoQUx_4w

**Reading quiz #4

Week 9: Hints from Music Education and Music Theory Pedagogy

M:

Reading

- Hoffman, Richard, William Pelto, and John W. White. 1996. "Takadimi: A Beat-Oriented System of Rhythm Pedagogy." *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 10(1): 7-30.
- Houlahan, Micheál. 1990. "Sound Thinking." *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 4 (1): 85-109.

Response

- Choose your own response: Choose one of the following systems of imitative or non-lexical syllables: **shōga in Japanese musics**, **gu-eum in Korean musics**, **South Asian rhythmic systems (solkattu or bol)**, **scat singing**, **canntaireachd in bagpipe music**, **drum vocables in gamelan**, **drum vocables in Ewe music**, or another example of your own choosing, with instructor approval. This syllable system will be the topic of your final project. As a preliminary exercise, write a 250-word description of this system. Your response should describe:
    - What drew you to this particular choice
    - Your current familiarity level
    - Some noticeable features of the system
    - What you hope to explore for the final presentation

Th:

No class – Thanksgiving break

Week 10: Teach Us What You've Learned!

M and Th:
Final project presentations: making sense of syllables

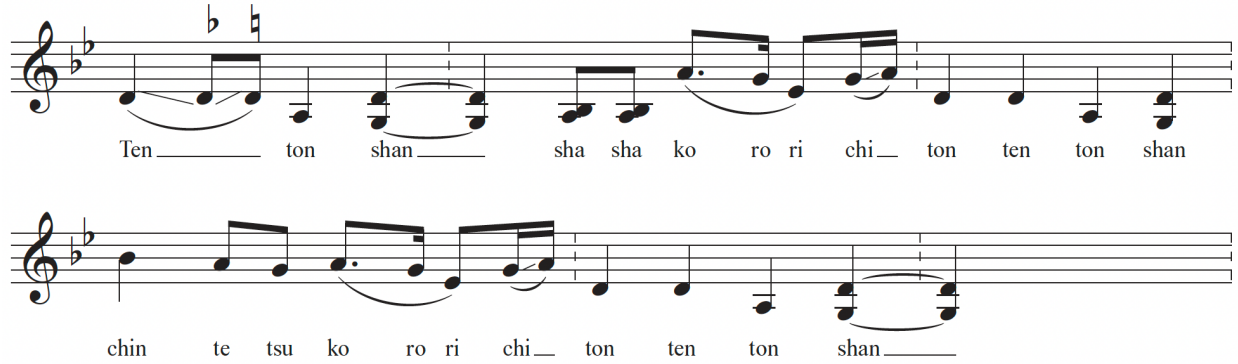
[Appendix]

Handout: Understanding shōga syllables in the koto work "Rokudan no shirabe"

Shōga are mnemonic syllables used by teachers of Japanese instruments to convey important information about the pieces being taught. As in the video here, in koto lessons, teachers will often sing the shōga while simultaneously demonstrating how to play the melody on the instrument. Similar syllables are used in a range of other Japanese performing arts such as taiko drumming, gagaku, and music for the shamisen. Each shōga conveys information about how the melody should be performed.

We will watch the excerpt several times, paying close attention to how the koto is played. For the final 2-3 viewings, we will try singing the shōga mnemonic syllables along with the instructor in the video.

Video by Makoto Hasegawa, 1:03-2:21: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWFhGajvkMY



Transcription based on Miyagi (2010).

Discussion: In groups, consider what you think the following sounds indicate in the music.

Sha

te *chi* *tsu* *to*

ko ro ri

-n

[Answer Key]

Some hints for students

- Note that two strings are tuned enharmonically!
- Pay especially close attention to the performer's right hand.
- Some elements of the syllables refer to performance technique, some to relative pitch, and some to rhythm.

Sha

Indicates that two strings on the koto should be played simultaneously. These are sometimes two adjacent strings: note that the two strings of the koto farthest from the player are tuned to an open fifth dyad, so that they can easily be struck with the plectrum on the middle finger of the right hand in a falling motion. The syllable "sha" is also used to indicate the performance of octaves, which are typically played with the thumb and middle finger.

T-/ch-

Syllables starting with "t" or "ch" indicate playing of a single string with the thumb. The basic syllable is "te," and the successive note determines the vowel: te-tsu is used for a step downward, te-chi for a step or leap upward, and te-to for a leap downward. Note that due to enharmonics, a leap for the hand may not result in a leap in pitch. For more detail refer to Nakaumura (2024).

Ko-ro-ri

Ko-ro-ri indicates a particular melodic and rhythmic pattern. It differs from the pattern "chi te tsu" above in both rhythm and performance technique: the middle note of a ko-ro-ri pattern should be a slightly quieter passing tone on the shorter note of a dotted rhythm, and it should be played in one smooth motion away from the player rather than three distinct attacks.

-n

The final -n is added to notes that last longer than half a pulse, indicating a longer duration. It can be added to any of the syllables above – shan, ten, ton, ko-ro-rin, etc.

Additional viewing

In addition to the syllables here, the koto has a wide range of shōga indicating performance techniques such as upstrokes of the plectra (su), scraping the strings (shu for quick or zu for slow), an accented striking of adjacent strings with the thumb (ryan), quick successive down and upstrokes (chiri) or a sustained tremolo followed by a double downward glissando (sa-ra-rin). Examples of koto performance techniques can be seen in the video series by Makoto Hasegawa: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1jOy1aqdKQCI4llqWDsYgoOw5-1acFDE&si=fp0b-PzC6wNlSMGi

References

Miyagi, Michio. 2010 [1947]. *Ikutaryū sōkyokushū* [Collected Ikuta-style Works for Koto]. Hōgakusha.

Nakamura, Emiko. 2024. "Learning Traditional Music Through the Relationship Between Sounds and Words in Kuchi-shoga: Developing Lessons for Koto in Elementary School Music Classes." *Shotō kyōiku karikyuramu kenkyū* [Primary Education Curriculum Research] 12:11-20.