**Music and Laughter**



Western thought has long identified both music and laughter as supremely human activities, profoundly tied to language, community, and social living. And yet, the power of music and laughter seems ultimately to come from their ability to wreak havoc amidst convention and to re-define our relationship with things beyond our knowledge – whether the divine, the animal kingdom, or simply the minds of others.

Drawing on a range of theories of laughter, this course is a compressed Western musical history of laughter and its contradictions. We will journey from questions of humor in Haydn’s String Quartets, to key moments of musical laughter in the operatic repertoire from Mozart’s laughing philosophers to Kundry’s laughter in Wagner’s *Parsifal*, to the history of laughing in/at modernist music, early sound recordings, and the invention of the laughtrack. Question about politics—and about gender, race, and class—will emerge in new configurations as we move through history.

The course will alternate in-class discussion of theoretical materials with close listening exercises. You will come away with a knowledge of Western music history between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, an ability to discuss musical detail in relation to political and philosophical ideas, and the skills to engage critically with musical and sonic artefacts as well as with your own modes of listening.

**Coursework**

Over the course of the semester you will complete assignments and discussions on bCourses, ranging from short written pieces to listening exercises. Both the assignments and the discussions will be assigned a maximum of five points each (points you will get easily if you stick to the prompt). You will be expected to elaborate on your assignments and bCcourses discussions in class as part of your participation grade.

For your final project, you will have the choice of either submitting an essay on a topic previously agreed with the instructor (maximum 1500 words), or of producing a 5-minute podcast (also on a previously agreed topic) inspired by the course materials and discussion.

**Final grade breakdown:**10% class attendance, 10% in-class participation, 30% preparatory assignments and discussion, 15% in-class midterm (**3/19**), 15% final exam (**5/1**), 20% final project (**Due 5/9**)

**Late work policy:** I will read preparatory assignments and discussions before class and will not be able to read them afterwards. Therefore, late participation in a discussion or late submission of an assignment will impact your grade. Assignments and discussion are due at 11.59pm the day before class; submitting after this deadline will mean that the assignment will count as incomplete.

**WEEK 1 Introduction**

* **Tuesday Jan 21**

**Introduction**

**“Listening to Laughter On Site,” Assignment due Thursday, 11am (for class discussion)**

* **Thursday Jan 23**

**Listening to Laughter On Site: In-class discussion**

**“Theories of Comedy in (Musical) Action”, Discussion on bCourses due Sun, 11.59pm.**

**WEEK 2 Laughing at Art Music in the Enlightenment (I)**

* **Tuesday Jan 28**

**Introduction to Theories of Comedy**

Reading: John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Theory of Humor*, chapt. 1, excerpts

* **Thursday Jan 30**

**Enlightened Humor, Haydn’s “The Joke” Quartet (1781), and**

**Mozart’s Musical Joke (1787)**

Listening: Haydn, String Quartet Op. 33 No.2, movt. IV (“The Joke”); Mozart, Musical Joke for Sextet**,** K 522 (1787), movt. II.

**WEEK 3 Laughing at Classical Music in the C20 (II)**

* **Tuesday Feb 4**

**The Politics of Contemporary Parodies of Classical Music**

Viewing:

**“How Do You Parody Beethoven?” discussion on bCourses due Wednesday, 11.59pm**

* **Thurs Feb 6**

**Parodying Beethoven**

**In-class Viewing**: Mauricio Kagel, *Ludwig Van* (1969),

P.D.Q. Bach, Beethoven Symphony No, 5, Missa Hilarious

Reading: Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, excerpts on Beethoven.

**WEEK 4 The Act of Laughing**

**Bcourses group discussion of Parvulescu, due Monday, 11.59pm.**

* **Tues Feb 11**

**The Act of Laughter in History**

Reading: Anca Parvulescu,*Laughter, Notes on a Passion***,** Chapter 1 (Civilizing Laughter)

* **Thurs Feb 13**

**The Act of Laughter: In-class performance and discussion**

**WEEK 5 Opera Laughter (I)**

* **Tues Feb 18**

Blocked Voices, Flutes, and Laughter in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*

Listening/Viewing: W. A. Mozart, *The Magic Flute* (1791), excerpts

**“Analyzing Operatic Laughter” Assignment, due Wednesday 2/19 at 11.59pm**

* **Thurs Feb 20**

(Laughter?) Nonsense, and Orientalism

Listening/Viewing: Gioachino Rossini, *L’Italiana in Algeri* (1813), Act I Finale “Nella testa ho un campanello,” W. A. Mozart, *Così fan tutte* (1790), excerpts

**“Listening to Falstaff” Discussion, Due Mon, 2/24, 11.59pm**

**WEEK 6 Opera Laughter (II)**

* **Tues Feb 25**

**Falstaff's Laugh**

Listening:Giuseppe Verdi, *Falstaff*(1893), whole opera

* **Thurs Feb 27**

**Strauss’ *Fledermaus* and Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffmann* (or: Adele and Olympia laugh)**

Listening:

Joseph Strauss Jr., *Die Fledermaus* (1874), Act 2, Aria ('Mein Herr Marquis', My Dear Marquis), a.k.a. Adele's Laughing Song; Jacques Offenbach, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, Olympia’s song.

**WEEK 7 Writing the Laughter of Others:**

**Opera Wrap-Up and Writing Experiment**

* **Tuesday March 3**

**Kundry’s Laughter in *Parsifal***

Listening/Viewing: Richard Wagner, *Parsifal* (1882), excerpts

**“Writing Laughter,” Assignment, Due Weds 3/4, 11.59pm**

* **Thursday March 5**

**Writing Laughter: Exercise, Discussion, Performance**

**WEEK 8 Modernism and Laughter**

* **Tuesday March 10**

**The Second Viennese School and Wretched Laughter:**

**Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg**

Listening/Viewing:Arnold Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), excerpt; Alban Berg, *Wozzeck*, 1922 (excerpts)

* **Thursday March 12**

**Laughing at Music, Stravinsky, Rite of Spring Premiere**

**+ How to Edit a Laugh**

**WEEK 9 Mid-Term Prep and In-Class Exam**

* **Tuesday March 17**

**In-Class Midterm**

* **Thursday March 19**

**Explanation of final projects and audio editing tutorial**

**WEEK 10: Spring Break!**

**WEEK 11 Race Records, Laughing Songs I**

* **Tuesday, March 31**

**Black Laughter and Race Records in the Early Twentieth Century**

Listening:George W. Johnson, “The Laughing Song” (1895 ca), Jelly Roll Morton, “Hyena Stomp,” (1926)

**“Appropriations and Adaptations of Black Laughter” Assignment due Wednesday, 1/4 at 11.59pm**

* **Thursday, April 2**

**Politics of Appropriation of Laughing Songs**

Listening: Berardo Cantalamessa, “‘A risa,” 1901; Charles Jolly, “The Laughing Policeman,” (1922)

**WEEK 12 Race Records, Laughing Songs II**

* **Tuesday 7 April**

**Black Laughter in the Harlem Renaissance**

Reading: Ralph Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter,” excerpt; Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion*, ch. 2, excerpts.

* **Thursday 9 April**

**Louis Armstrong's take on the Laughing Song**

Listening: Laughin’ Louie (1932)

**WEEK 13 Canned Laughter**

* **Tuesday 14 April**

**The Laffbox, Canned Laughter, and the idea of the Public**

Reading: TBA

**“What does a Laughtrack *Do*?” Assignment due Wednesday, 4/15 at 11.59pm**

* **Thursday 16 April**

**What does a Laughtrack *Do*? Workshop on how to Edit Laughter 2**

**WEEK 14 Editing Laughter + Exam Review**

* **Tues 21 April: Review of Student Edited Laughter**
* **Thurs 23 April: Final Exam Review, Weeks 2-7**

**WEEK 15 Exam Review + In-class Final**

* **Tues 28 April, Final Exam Review, Weeks 8-11**
* **Thurs 30 April, In-Class Final**

**WEEK 16: NO CLASS, FINAL PROJECT DUE FRIDAY, 8 MAY AT 11.59PM**