

Music 121: Queens College (Fall 2025)

INSTRUCTOR

Madison Spahn

EMAIL

mspahn@gradcenter.cuny.edu

COURSE INFO

Tuesday/Thursday

1:40-2:55PM

Music 308

OFFICE HOURS

BY APPOINTMENT

Zoom

ID: 899 448 0793

COURSE OVERVIEW

Music surrounds us in our daily lives and work and is an integral part of our social fabric, but we often don't have the language to satisfyingly describe what we hear. In this course, students will become familiar with the basic terminology of music and attempt to use their own writing to describe and analyze musical pieces, artists, and experiences. Specifically, we will focus on music by women and learn about the important role that they have played as composers, performers, patrons, and activists throughout music history. This is a writing-intensive course, and students should come to class prepared to share and receive feedback on their writing. It is a College Writing 2 course and satisfies an English Composition requirement of the Pathways General Education Required Core.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To become familiar with and apply the technical vocabulary of music.
- To develop critical listening skills that allow you to identify and articulate musical characteristics in varied musical genres.
- To develop the ability to read critically, summarize, and synthesize various texts.
- To improve your ability to communicate ideas clearly and concisely in writing in a variety of rhetorical genres.
- To learn and engage in the processes of drafting, revision, and peer review.
- To learn and apply research and citation skills in the music discipline.

REQUIRED TEXTS

All assigned readings will be available to you on Brightspace as PDFs.

COURSE POLICIES/EXPECTATIONS

1. **Attendance and active engagement.** Class will meet twice weekly, in person. Attendance will not be recorded but will be critical to completing your daily reflection assignments (see below). We will discuss topics and music that do not necessarily appear in the assigned readings, as well as break down larger projects and have a chance to answer questions. Attending regularly is important for understanding new concepts and staying on top of your assignments. If there are extenuating circumstances that will prevent you from attending class for an extended period, please let me know right away so that we can discuss the best options for your continued academic success.



I understand that technology has become an integrated part of education, **but I am asking for no laptops or tablets to be used during class.** There are no midterms or final exams in this course, and I would prefer you to be focused and engaged rather than trying to copy everything on the slides or distracted by other content. Class time is an opportunity to share opinions on the topic at hand, and you will gain much more from the course by actively participating. Music is often subjective and makes a great topic for discussion and debate. **There are no wrong ideas!**

2. **Late work.** As a rule, all assignments are due by 11:59PM on the assigned due date (unless you are bringing the assignment to class for peer review, in which case it is due at the start of class). **Please do not make a habit of submitting right at 11:59PM, as I will not be sympathetic to technological problems for last-minute submissions.** That said, each student will have two “late passes” per semester. To use a late pass, fill out the form on Brightspace BEFORE the assignment’s due date, and you will be granted a 48-hour extension on the assignment, no questions asked. Otherwise, I expect assignments to be completed on time and will not accept late work. If you find yourself regularly unable to complete weekly assignments on time, please contact me directly.
3. **Academic honesty.** Academic dishonesty is prohibited in the City University of New York. Penalties for academic dishonesty include academic sanctions, such as failing or otherwise reduced grades, and/or disciplinary sanctions, including suspension and/or expulsion. Examples of academic dishonesty include but are not limited to cheating, plagiarism (passing someone else’s work off as your own), obtaining unfair advantage, and/or falsification of records and official documents. If you share an assignment with a classmate and they copy your work, with or without your permission, both of you can be penalized. Simply put, academic dishonesty will not be tolerated in this class. If you are unsure whether an action may be academic dishonesty (such as working on an assignment with a classmate), **ask me first.**

A note on generative AI: I know that we are living in a world where generative AI is all around us, and there are many things for which it can be useful. WRITING IS NOT ONE OF THEM. We will work on proofreading and grammar in class, but in general I will be generous with grading in these respects. I want to hear YOUR thoughts and YOUR opinions, and a computer can’t write those, no matter how smart it is. I know it’s tempting, but please do your own writing. If I suspect that you are using AI to generate responses, I will reach out and ask you to redo the assignments if you want credit.

COURSE WEBSITE

Your one-stop shop for all course information is the course website on Brightspace. To access Brightspace, visit <http://brightspace.cuny.edu> and login with your CUNY login credentials (Firstname.Lastname##@login.cuny.edu). Once you click on the course title, you will see tabs for accessing PDFs of readings, taking quizzes, and uploading assignments. If you have any problems accessing Brightspace content, please let me know right away as this will be a very important resource for the course.

ASSIGNMENTS

For more details on expectations and grading, please consult the individual assignment documents posted on Brightspace.

1. Smaller Assignments
 - a. Music fundamentals quiz (**due Tuesday 9/16**)
 - i. This quiz will take place after the first three lessons on music fundamentals to allow you to review critical vocabulary and concepts that will be used throughout the rest of the semester. The quiz will be administered online on Brightspace.



- b. Reading and in-class reflections
- i. During Weeks 4-15 of the course (beginning with class on Tuesday 9/16), you will be asked to reflect on the day's reading or listening assignments and in-class content. This assignment has two parts, each worth 4 points:
 1. **BEFORE CLASS:** Write a short paragraph (~150 words) addressing the following questions, and post on Brightspace:
 - a. What was your biggest takeaway from the reading or listening? What was the main point or argument?
 - b. Choose one quote from the reading or listening that particularly stood out to you. Why did you find it interesting or surprising?
 - c. Was there anything in the reading or listening that was confusing or that you have questions about?
 2. **DURING CLASS:** We will have short in-class writing assignments, some related to listening to and analyzing music, and some about improving and editing our writing. These must be written and turned in during class (so have pen and paper with you!) but are graded only based on completion.

The reflections and activities are your opportunity to show your engagement with the course material and keep constantly practicing your writing skills. There are **18** potential opportunities for daily reflections. **HOWEVER**, you only need to complete **15** reflections throughout the semester to receive full points towards your grade (8 points per reflection, 120 points total). Any reflections completed beyond the initial 15 will count as extra credit (8 points each).

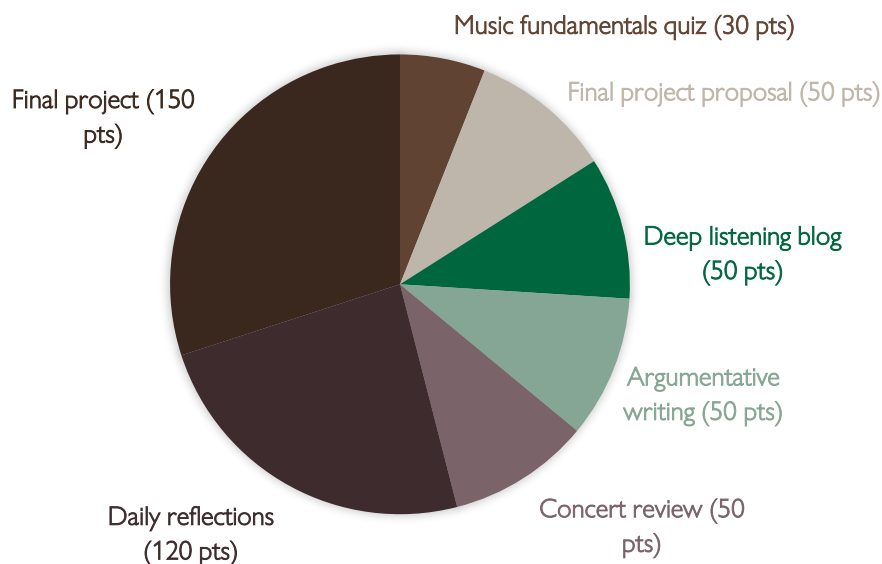
2. Writing Assignments

- a. Concert Review (**draft due Tuesday 9/30, final due Thursday 10/09**)
 - i. One of the key goals of this course is to learn to talk and write about the music that we hear. You will be assigned to select a recorded concert of women's music from a given list (or attend a live concert!) and write a concert review discussing the works performed and the quality of the performance.
 - b. Deep Listening Creative Writing (**draft due online Thursday 11/06, final due Thursday 11/13**)
 - i. Later in the course, we will learn about the concept of deep listening and hearing music in the sounds of everyday life. You will be assigned to write a short creative piece (blog, poem, short story) on your own experience of deep listening.
 - c. What is an Activist: Argumentative Writing Activity (**draft due Tuesday 11/25, final due Tuesday 12/02**)
 - i. In our third unit, we will discuss different definitions of feminism and look at different ways that women in music have been social activists. You will be assigned to write a short argumentative essay to persuade your reader (Professor Spahn) why a musician of your choice should be considered a social activist.
- ## 3. Final Project: Album Notes (**draft due Tuesday 12/9, final due Friday 12/19**)
- a. Your final project for this course is designed to synthesize your new musical vocabulary, critical listening, research skills, and analytic writing. You will design a compilation album of six pieces of music written by women (three from the Western classical genre, and three from any genre). Then, you will write liner notes for the album that give the reader background information about the artist, explain the social context of the piece, and give a short analysis of the musical content. Midway through the semester, you will submit a final project proposal (**due Thursday 10/23**) identifying your chosen pieces of music and providing an annotated bibliography of at least five external sources of information.

GRADING

Grading will be done on a point system as indicated below, for a total of **500 points** possible throughout the semester.

GRADING



Final grades will be determined as follows:

Total Points	Percentage	Grade
483-500	97-100	A+
463-482	93-96	A
448-462	90-92	A-
433-447	87-89	B+
413-432	83-86	B
398-412	80-82	B-
383-397	77-79	C+
363-382	73-76	C
348-362	70-72	C-
333-347	67-69	D+

298-332	60-66	D
0-297	0-59	F

ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Students with disabilities or other conditions requiring academic accommodations should:

1. Register with and provide documentation to the Special Services office (located at Kiely Hall, Room 108) by emailing QC.SPSV@qc.cuny.edu or calling (718) 997-5870.
2. Bring a letter to the instructor during the first week of classes indicating the need for accommodations and what type.

Your success in this class is important to me. If for any reason the format of this course or its assignments is inaccessible to you, please do not hesitate to contact me directly so that we can work together to adapt content so that it both meets your needs and the requirements of the course.

QUEENS COLLEGE RESOURCES

Need a laptop to complete your work? Laptops connected to the campus wireless network can be borrowed from Rosenthal Library for up to five hours at a time. Laptops can be checked out by QC students with a valid ID at the Multimedia Commons Service Desk on Level 1 and must be returned at least one hour before the desk closes.

Need someone to talk to? Queens College Counseling Services is located on the first floor of Frese Hall and is open Monday through Friday from 9AM-5PM. Counseling Services offers free and confidential sessions with licensed psychologists, social workers, and counselors, as well as referrals to external resources. Make an initial appointment by emailing CounselingServices@qc.cuny.edu and find out more at <https://www.qc.cuny.edu/cs/>. Peer Support Services can also offer connections with other students to discuss questions or concerns you might have about student life. You can find out more about Peer Support at <https://www.qc.cuny.edu/sl/peer-support-services/>.

Need help with writing? The Writing Center, located at Kiely Hall 229, is open Monday through Thursday, 10AM-5PM for walk-ins and scheduled appointments. Writing Center tutors can assist with topic development, structure, grammar, and more. Find out more at <https://www.qc.cuny.edu/academics/wc/>.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Assigned reading and/or listening should be completed before the class date on which they are listed. Assignments are indicated on the date they are due.

DATE	SUBJECT	READING/LISTENING	ASSIGNMENT
UNIT 1: MUSIC FUNDAMENTALS			
Week 1: Introduction			
08/28	Introduction and syllabus		
Week 2: Music Fundamentals			



09/02	Music fundamentals: properties of sound (pitch, dynamics, timbre, articulation)	<i>Understanding Music</i> p. 2-14	
09/04	Music fundamentals: organization of sound (melody, harmony, rhythm)	<i>Understanding Music</i> p. 14-23	
Week 3: Music Fundamentals (continued)			
09/9	Music fundamentals: musical organization (texture, form, genre)	<i>Understanding Music</i> p. 23-30	
09/11	Evaluating and writing about music	<i>Resonances</i> p. 480-482 ("What is good music?") Jonathan Bellman, <i>A Short Guide to Writing About Music</i> , p. 25-29	
UNIT 2: WOMEN IN MUSIC HISTORY			
Week 4: Early Music: Court and Church			
09/16	Cloistered nuns and songs of the <i>trobairitz</i>	<i>Resonances</i> p. 393-400 ("Hildegard of Bingen") and p. 272-278 ("Countess of Dia")	Music Fundamentals Quiz DUE
09/18	Singers and composers of the Italian Renaissance	<i>Resonances</i> p. 288-293 ("Barbara Strozzi")	
Week 5: Piano Women: "The Professional"			
09/23	NO CLASS (College Closed)		
09/25	Professional composers and performers of the 19 th century	Nancy Reich, "Clara Schumann"	
Week 6: Piano Women: "The Amateur"			
9/30	Performances in the home and musical "salons" in the 19 th century Concert review peer review	Nancy Reich, "The Power of Class: Fanny Hensel and the Mendelssohn Family"	Concert Review Draft DUE (In Class)
10/02	NO CLASS (College Closed)		
Week 7: Divas			
10/07	Opera Discuss final project proposal	Watch: Maria by Callas	
10/9	Musical theater Discuss locating and citing sources	Eddie Shapiro, <i>Nothing Like a Dame: Conversations with the Great Women of Musical Theater</i> (CHOOSE ONE CHAPTER)	Concert Review Final Draft DUE



Week 8: Women in the Orchestra

10/14 NO CLASS (CUNY Monday)

10/16 Women as instrumentalists Carol Neuls-Bates, "Women's Orchestras in the United States, 1925-45"

Week 9: Contemporary Classical Composers

10/21 20th century modernist composers
Discuss deep listening project
Matilda Gaume, "Ruth Crawford Seeger"
Pauline Oliveros, "The Earth Worm Also Sings"

10/23 21st-century living composers Watch: [Missy Mazzoli Interview](#) Final Project Proposal and Bibliography DUE

UNIT 3: ACTIVISM, FEMINISM, AND LABOR

Week 10: What is feminism?

10/28 Composers and women's suffrage Jane A. Bernstein, "'Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!' Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer"

10/30 The role of music in protest and women's liberation Listen: [Syd and Kathleen Hanna on Why 'Being Ourselves Is an Act of Rebellion'](#)

Week 11: Can a pop star be an activist?

11/04 What is an activist?
Discuss argumentative writing activity
Emily Lordi, "Surviving the Hustle: Beyonce's Performance of Work"

11/06 NO CLASS (Prof Spahn at Conference) – Deep Listening Peer Review (ONLINE) Deep Listening Creative Writing Draft DUE (Online)

Week 12: Music and Race

11/11 20th century Black women classical composers *Resonances* p. 236-244 ("1933: A Century of Progress")

11/13 Women in blues, jazz, and rock Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens*, p. 29-51 Deep Listening Creative Writing Final DUE

Week 13: Women and Technology

11/18 Film, TV, and video game composers
Watch: [Wendy Carlos Interview 1989](#)
Watch: [The Women who Pioneered Video Game Music](#)



11/20 Electronics, female DJs. and
"cyberwomen" Catherine Provenzano, "Making Voices"

Week 14: Writing

11/25 In-class writing workshop and
peer review **Argumentative Writing
Draft DUE (In Class)**

11/27 NO CLASS (College Closed)

Week 15: Gender and Sexuality

12/02 "Performing" gender Watch: [Judith Butler Explains Gender Theory](#) **Argumentative Writing
Final DUE**

12/04 Trans and non-binary voices Katherine Meizel, "Voice and Identity in Gender
Transition"

Week 16: Presentations

12/9 Final project peer reviews and
editing **Final Project Draft DUE
(In Class)**

12/11 Class wrap-up/discussion **Final Project DUE
FRIDAY 12/19**

