

History of Music Theory, MUS 220r
A Case for the Environmental Humanities:
Diagrammatic Practices in Western Musical Thought
Spring 2023
Suzannah Clark

Course Information

Course Meeting: Time & Place

Fridays 9:45-11:45am

Music Building, Davison Room

Course Head: Professor Suzannah Clark

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Course Description

Diagrams are a hallmark of music theory: they illustrate concepts, serve didactic purposes, put knowledge on display. They also invite different modes of engagement by readers, compared to the prose that surrounds them in treatises. In this course, we will focus on landmark diagrams in Western music theory that, for the most part, illustrate the organization of pitch material as a means to fathom the physical phenomena of the cosmos and to comprehend earthly performance and listening activities, though we shall consider the nature of concepts that seem to have resisted diagrammatic representation. We will look at how and why these diagrams were constructed, and how they have been read, reread, or in some cases misread. As we explore music theory's role in shaping science of the natural world, from astronomy to chemistry, we will investigate how historical creators and readers of music theory's diagrams came to understand their place in the world.

The course will be divided into two parts. In the first part, our exhibits will pertain to Ancient Greek musical thought, with emphasis on the reinterpretation of ancient knowledge in the Latin west during the Middle Ages, via its transmission and transformation within the Arabic textual tradition; the chronological tableau of this part of the course will end with disputes between Robert Fludd and Johannes Kepler over mathematics, music, astronomy, and the divine at the dawn of the Scientific Revolution. The second part will span the late eighteenth century to the present day and will consider the uses of geometry to shape ideas about tonality, as well as how notated musical examples were thought to harbor unique clues about a role for symmetry in how major and minor ought to be conceived and put into musical practice.

For the final project, students will be invited to select a diagram from—and scrutinize the diagrammatic culture of—any musical tradition and time period.

Revision: I have switched the order from two parts to three modules, so that we will start with more familiar diagrams before going back in time. In other words, the course will not be chronological.

A word of (Cartesian!) advice:

“In the case of most books, once we have read a few lines and looked at a few of the diagrams, the entire message is perfectly obvious. The rest is added only to fill up paper.”

—René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol 1*,
trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

Descartes was understandably frustrated by long-winded authors. But it's easy to get in the habit of skimming texts and looking at the nice pictures in music treatises. Alas, we will come across a number of instances where theorists and scholars have glanced at a diagram and read only a few lines—or no lines at all—and presumed to understand the rest. As we'll see in this course, the message has not always turned out to be entirely obvious, and readers have misinterpreted what various diagrams depict. Luckily, misreadings are not all bad: they give us a golden opportunity to trace the history of people's perception over time. One lesson we will learn in this course is *always, always, always* pay close attention to diagrams and musical examples, and be sure to read the (surrounding) prose carefully.

Generals & Research

For graduate students in the theory program, “history of theory” is one of the papers for Generals. Many of the research guides below are quite old by now, but nonetheless they can be helpful in narrowing down the theorists you might wish to focus on or in finding topics for Generals.

- David Damschroder and David Russell Williams, *Music Theory from Zarlino to Schenker: A Bibliography and Guide* (Pendragon Press, 1991), on reserve. This is an excellent starting point: look up the name of a theorist and you will find (1) a short summary of his (*sic*) main theoretical achievements (2) a list of treatises, with translations if available (3) a bibliography of secondary literature up to c. 1991.
- David Damschroder, *Thinking about Harmony: Historical Perspectives on Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), on reserve
- Benjamin McKay Ayotte, *Heinrich Schenker: A Guide to Research* (Routledge, 2004), on reserve
- David Carson Berry, *A Topical Guide to Schenkerian Literature: An Annotated Bibliography with Indices* (Pendragon Press, 2004), on reserve
- James E. Perone, *Harmony Theory: A Bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1997), in the Aldrich Room ML128.T5 P47 1997
- James E. Perone, *Form and Analysis Theory: A Bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1998), in the Aldrich Room, ML128.T5 P45 1998
- Thomas Christensen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), online access.

Final Project—In Class Presentation

Take a diagram in music theory and explain how/when/by whom it was created, and what it illustrates. As relevant, also discuss how it has been interpreted, its legacy or reception, and how, within the treatise or tradition you have chosen, readers are invited to engage with the diagram as an “object” of study, thought, performance, or didacticism (or anything else). Your diagram may come from any music theoretical tradition and time period. Presentation time: 15 minutes, with 5 minutes Q&A.

As the course proceeds, you'll see that diagrams come in the form of hammers, hands, circles, spirals, cones, hexagons, cubes, grids, lattices, spiders, and so on. The important thing will be to select a diagram that illustrates a theoretical concept. Ideally everyone in class will work on a different diagram. Do not select a diagram that has been dealt with in depth in class but you may choose one that has come up in passing or is related to something that has come up in class.

Grading & Guide to Preparing for Seminar

As this is a seminar class, you are expected to do the suggested reading each week and come to class ready to discuss it. The weekly reading lists will usually contain a section *Things to think about; things to discuss*. This is intended to guide your reading, however feel free to raise other points in class. It can be helpful to come to class with 3 ideas, which can range from something you found cool or interesting, to point(s) you didn't understand or something you found obscure or counterintuitive in a theorist's or scholar's explanation. When you encounter a new diagram, first look at it and write down what you think it depicts—e.g. do the letter names represent scales, triads, or just pitches, and if so in what tuning system (if relevant)?—then read what the theorist and scholar(s) say. Do your assumptions match up with theirs? If not, this is something to discuss in class, even if you read it completely incorrectly—misreadings can be interesting!

If you find it difficult to think of “discussion topics” in music theory because it seems to you to be about facts, definitions, and concepts, then remember that part of preparation is making sure you follow the explanations in the reading. Some of what we will do in class is rehearse the theorists' explanations, so your participation can be contributing an elegant, succinct explication of the concepts in the reading and a reconstruction in your own words of the theorist's explanation.

The final grade is determined through a combination of seminar participation (60%), your final presentation (30%), and your participation in the Q&A of your classmates's presentations (10%).

The List of Topics

Jan 27 Introduction: Reading Diagrams

Feb 3—Away—

Module 1: Fundamentals in Tonal Theory

Feb 10 The Circle of Fifths: Origins and Legacy

Feb 17 Geometry, Stories, and Drawing Conclusions: circles, squares, cubes, cylinders, cones...

Feb 24 Gottfried Weber's Rest: Chords and The Invention of Roman Numeral Analysis

Module 2: Back to the Ancients

Mar 3 Math or Hearing?—Schools of Thought: Pythagoras, Aristoxenus, Ptolemy

Mar 10 Music Theory and the Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages

Mar 17—Spring Break—

Mar 24 The Scientific Revolution and Understanding the Cosmos: How Music Theory Shaped Kepler's Third Law

Module 3: Blunders in the History of Music Theory

Mar 31 The Periodic Table and The Shape of Dualism

Apr 7 Von Cube's Roman Numeral, Or Schenker's Errant Pupil

Apr 14 Schenker's Trapezoid and the Politics of the *Urlinie*

Apr 21 Presentations (15 mins + 5mins Q&A)

Extra: **Apr 28** Presentations (15 mins + 5mins Q&A)

Disability Access Office (DAO)

If you require accommodations for a documented disability or medical condition, please see <https://ao.fas.harvard.edu/>. Reach out to a member of the DAO staff if the website or procedure seems overwhelming; or contact dao@fas.harvard.edu or tel. 617-496-8707 to let them know you need assistance with the procedures.

Academic Integrity

1. Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For the presentations in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of presentation topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. If you receive any help with preparing your presentation (feedback on drafts, powerpoints, or oral practice, etc.), you must also acknowledge this assistance. This is standard scholarly practice in all academic writing and public presentations.

We support the Honor Code

While the Honor Code applies to the undergraduates taking this course, the code contains ideals for everyone.

Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work with integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to our ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.