

## “What Does This Artwork Ask of Me?”

### Using Challenging Music To Teach Empathy and Empowerment

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Countless articles have been published in the past few years concerning the fate of the arts and humanities in higher education. On the one hand, we are told that these disciplines are dying because they are irrelevant to the new values of our society, which prioritize the teaching of skills that will be directly applicable to students' future jobs. On the other hand, arguments in favor of the arts and humanities often deploy these same values, arguing that studying art will burnish a graduate's status on the job market because corporations want to hire creative employees. But how might we defend our discipline on its own terms, without appealing to a capitalist logic that seeks to instrumentalize all learning? For the past seven semesters, I have been teaching a class at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass) that seeks (in part) to address this issue. In this article, I demonstrate some of the ways that classes of this kind—classes that refuse to instrumentalize course content in corporate terms—offer liberating opportunities for both students and teachers. In this kind of class, the exploration of music and other art forms serves as a springboard for students to explore ethical, philosophical questions and develop curiosity about themselves, one another, and the world.

I begin with a brief history and explanation of the class and the different types of student learning objectives it seeks to fulfill. Then, in the following three sections, I discuss some of the lectures, events, and assignments I have developed for the course, demonstrating how encountering new music can promote empathy, engagement, and empowerment. First, I examine the theme of discomfort, focusing on the discussions and activities I programmed around a required live film screening. Students were encouraged to think about discomfort—their own and others'—and to embrace certain uncomfortable experiences as potential sites for expanding their empathetic awareness. Second, I detail a multi-week close listening assignment and the various ways this assignment helps students think about closely engaging with many disparate aspects of the world and their own lives. Third, I discuss the ways I use music and art to challenge the students' value systems, which tend to be based on monetization

of entertainment products and fetishization of technique. Students in this course often appreciate artworks primarily in terms of how much money they made and/or how much technical skill they took to produce. By contrast, I urge students to identify, articulate, and build upon their own instinctive responses to works of art, and to develop what Timothy Taylor calls “other regimes of value” than the merely economic.<sup>1</sup> This is fundamentally an act of self-empowerment; rather than identifying all value in market terms—which displaces the assignment of value onto an invisible outside process—students must challenge themselves to look inward, and think about artistic, social, and political value in other terms. By helping students conceptualize other ways of understanding and valuing art, I try to empower them to find their own thoughts interesting, and to take an active approach to building knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

### **Lively Arts: Background History and Present Configuration**

This course, called Lively Arts, is a large, general-education introductory course with enrollment of about 150 students. I teach it in the Department of Music and Dance every semester, and the students who take it are primarily majoring in fields such as business, sports management, tourism and hospitality, or the hard sciences. In addition to weekly lectures (which are taught by myself and a rotating cast of visiting artists and scholars) and a once per week discussion section, students are required to attend several performances, readings, and exhibits on campus.

Before I took it over, the course was structured along what Colleen Conway and Thomas Hodgman call the “transmission” model of teaching, in which the curriculum is content-driven and the teacher makes pedagogical decisions grounded in an effort to deliver that content effectively.<sup>3</sup> Students were

1. Timothy Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 10.

2. The title of this article evokes Fontanelle’s famously frustrated question, “sonata, que me veux-tu?” The sonata, seemingly void of concrete meaning, nonetheless also seems to require something from us; it demands we attempt to understand it and express our understanding in words. As Alison Deadman puts it, Fontanelle’s outburst “highlights the challenge of expressing the meaning of one medium with another,” a central challenge of teaching and learning about music in the classroom. By expanding this question to include artworks other than music, I mean to indicate that all artworks retain something of the sonata’s mystery; regardless of any explanation we may be given by the artist, the artwork also retains a degree of autonomy, and is capable of “meaning” any number of things its creator did not intend. By asking my students “what the artwork asks of them,” I seek to move beyond mere assessments of technique or style. See Alison P. Deadman, “Sonata, What Do You Want Of Me?: Teaching Rhetorical Strategies for Writing about Music,” *The Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 6 (Spring 2016), 23–40.

3. Colleen M. Conway and Thomas M. Hodgman, *Teaching Music in Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

expected to learn basic vocabularies of a set number of art forms, were then tested via multiple-choice examinations, and demonstrated their knowledge in performance reports. Lectures were oriented around discrete and conventionally circumscribed art forms—“classical music,” “visual arts,” “dance”—and each lecture conveyed a brief chronological history of the art in question.

Although the transmission model is still common, many scholars have challenged it in recent decades. The pedagogue Paolo Freire argued that this kind of class is based on a “banking” model in which students are viewed as “empty” and education is seen as an act of making “deposits” of knowledge, information, and skills into them. Freire notes that this conceptualization of education projects “an absolute ignorance onto others,” turning students into “containers” waiting passively to be “filled” by the teacher. Freire argues that true education must begin “with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students.”<sup>4</sup>

The literature professor Jesse Curran discusses one way of accomplishing this reconciliation. Curran advocates for practicing a type of “engaged pedagogy” in which the goal of the class is “praxis”; when teachers share their own thoughts, their own process, their own moments of surprise or confusion during class, and their own difficulties with ideas or material, they help to create a space where ideas are generated collectively.<sup>5</sup> Praxis-based teaching methods encourage growth and learning in everyone, including the teacher. I tried to reorient the teaching style in my Lively Arts class along these lines. During lectures and discussions, I talk openly about my thought processes or about the aspects of my personal history that make a given artwork challenging, disturbing, or beautiful to me. If I have struggled to appreciate an artwork, I share that struggle with my students, and ask them to comment or reflect on it in order to see how it relates to their own struggle (or lack thereof). Furthermore, I sometimes openly discuss the difficulties I encounter in planning and teaching the class itself, or the way my idealistic teaching goals are often punctured by the various bureaucratic necessities of running a large class like this, or even by the inevitably authoritarian structure a class of this size takes on. By sharing my personal journeys and interior thoughts, I encourage students to take their own ideas, pasts, and present experiences seriously. When I acknowledge a personal struggle or a lack of coherent thought that potentially destabilizes my absolute authority in the classroom, students perk up and become more

4. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2003 [1970]), 72.

5. Jesse Curran, “Mindfulness, Sustainability, and the Power of Personal Practice” in *Narratives of Educating for Sustainability in Unsustainable Environments*, eds. Jane Haladay, Scott Hicks (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 181–200.

actively engaged. By honestly revealing my own personal failures, confusions, or weaknesses, I encourage students to understand and sympathize with my own humanity. In this way, I serve the overriding goal of the class, which is not to “bank knowledge,” but rather to promote empathy. Through such practices, a teacher can demonstrate their unwillingness to participate in the transmission model of teaching, instead creating a space for mutual discussion and (hopefully) mutual revelation.

In updating Lively Arts, then, I fundamentally transformed its pedagogical orientation and altered its learning objectives. To begin with, I abandoned chronological histories of art forms and multiple-choice exams. Instead, I wanted students to be engaged in the process of developing their own thoughts and ideas. Ralph Tyler’s foundational 1949 study of effective pedagogy established the notion that learning is an active process on the part of the student, recognizing that it is what the student does that encourages learning, “not what the teacher does.”<sup>6</sup> The “transmission” model of course design starts with the question, How can the teacher best impart certain material? I instead asked myself, What kind of environment would best encourage the kind of active “doing” that Tyler advocates? How can I help them acquire the knowledge, skills, or practices that they might not learn in other classes? In what ways can this class help, inspire, or positively shape the students who take it?

Lively Arts students usually have no background in the arts or humanities, and this discomfort became an important value around which I reoriented the class. Many of them have never attended a live performance or art exhibit of any sort, and they often lack not only basic musical and artistic knowledge but also an awareness of major themes in general intellectual history. For many of them, “learning” has meant the mastery of facts, algorithms, or programming languages, and they often express discomfort with their belief that in a humanities classroom “you just say your opinion.”<sup>7</sup> In reconceiving the class I decided to turn further toward this discomfort, rather than try to assuage it. Indeed, my students’ discomfort with art’s perceived lack of rules represents a potential site of empowerment for them.

6. Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 63.

7. Student quotations used throughout this article come anecdotally from in-class discussions; from in-class writing exercises during which students were asked to reflect on broad questions and jot down their thoughts on various topics of the day; and from papers and projects students turned in over the course of the Spring, 2017 semester. All student quotations are anonymous. This article is in compliance with University of Massachusetts, Amherst’s rules regarding the protection of human research subjects. Additionally, I have obtained consent from the three anonymous students whose work is included at greater length near the end of the article.

I developed a series of what Maria Archetto calls “foreground” and “background” pedagogical goals.<sup>8</sup> Foreground goals are concrete and easy to convey and assess. My goals for Lively Arts are for students to learn:

1. to listen to and/or view works of art with close attention, and to describe them using appropriate vocabulary;
2. to formulate interesting questions about art works;
3. to develop basic writing skills;
4. to explore imaginative and subjective topics via several creative assignments; and
5. to attend, pay attention to, and discuss live performances and visual art exhibits.

Background goals, by contrast, are broader, more abstract, and hard or impossible to measure. In my class, these goals include helping students learn to:

1. become more empathetically aware of themselves as a member of a community;
2. engage with difference of all kinds with an open mind; and
3. become empowered to find their own thoughts interesting.

As I suggested above, many of these background goals concern the promotion of empathy, an increasing concern in our contemporary globalized culture and a major learning objective of this class. Recent scholarship in the fields of medicine, technology, and business has argued that these disciplines suffer from a lack of empathy; for example, there is a developing body of work that examines medical doctors and the way their ability to practice “clinical empathy” benefits patients.<sup>9</sup> In interrogating a perceived lack of empathy in certain contemporary fields of research and practice, some scholars have argued that investigating ideas from the arts and humanities encourages the development of empathy in students.<sup>10</sup> At a liberal arts college, students engage with art and with humanistic ideas and debates routinely, regardless of their major. At a school like UMass, however, students’ individual educations are extremely

8. Maria Archetto, “Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Introduction to Music Course,” in *Teaching Music History*, ed. Mary Natvig (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 69–76.

9. See for example Nicholas J. Bellacicco, and James A. Marcum, “The Pedagogy of Clinical Empathy: Formation of the Physician,” *Mirabilia Medicinæ* 6 (2016), 26–36.

10. See Bellacicco and Marcum; see also Johanna Shapiro, Elizabeth H. Morrison, and John R. Boker, “Teaching Empathy to First Year Medical Students: Evaluation of an Elective Literature and Medicine Course,” in which the authors demonstrate empirically that when medical students take classes involving the interpretation of poetry and prose, their understanding of patients’ perspectives “became more detailed and complex.” See *Education for Health* 17:1 (2004), 73–84.

specialized, and the few general education courses that they are required to take often constitute some of the only opportunities they have to encounter ideas outside of their own areas of study. Lively Arts thus offers an extraordinarily valuable chance to work with students headed for industries in which a lack of empathy is beginning to be perceived as a deficit that causes social harm.

I structure each semester around a few overarching topics (“The Sublime,” “The Enlightenment,” and “Time,” for example) that relate in some way to the required events I program. James Briscoe calls this “teaching by touchstone,” and it is an effective way of getting away from the “transmission” model of teaching.<sup>11</sup> Finally, in light of my new learning outcomes, I developed a “Guide to Encountering Art” that is introduced on the first day of class and that is emphasized in every lecture and homework assignment throughout the semester (see **Appendix A**). The guide is based on my colleague Lisa Donovan’s idea of the “essence” of the aesthetic encounter: Perception (objective description of facts), Response (subjective description of personal reactions), and Evaluation (creatively tie perceptions and responses together into an interpretive “big picture” idea about the artwork that conveys a sense of its value [or lack thereof]).

The touchstone topics of the Spring, 2017 semester were “Time” and “Discomfort.” Our exploration was guided by questions such as, How do we experience time? Is it possible for different people to experience time differently? How has time been understood by artists, historians, and scientists, in different eras? In what ways can different kinds of art explore the theme of time? Regarding discomfort, I asked students, What types of experiences, sounds, or thoughts make them uncomfortable and why? Why might an artist *want* an audience to feel discomfort? Can an artwork that is uncomfortable also be “good art?” What kinds of discomfort should we try to avoid in our lives, and what kinds should we embrace as sites of revelation or change, and how do we decide?

I also engaged students in discussions about boredom, a state defined by the intersection of time and discomfort. Indeed, “boredom” has become an unofficial touchstone I return to throughout the semester. Our inquiry of boredom is shaped by questions such as, Why is boredom uncomfortable? What aspects of required daily life are boring, and what makes them boring? What kinds of experiences does the act of being bored make possible? What kinds of things might we notice or realize, if we allowed ourselves to be bored instead of reaching for our phones as a means of distraction? We talk together about strategies for coping with boredom and turning it into a source of empowerment.

11. James Briscoe, “Avoiding the Slough of Despond: or, Teaching by Touchstone,” in *Vitalizing Music History Teaching*, ed. James R. Briscoe (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2010), 105–124.

**“What Does This Artwork Ask of Me?” *Decasia* and Discomfort**

An overriding question I ask students is “What does this artwork ask of us?” This is a question of empathy, and it asks students to look outside of themselves to find justification or meaning. One challenge presented by the student population of this class has to do with a tension between their approach to difference in theory versus in practice. My students typically profess that they believe in tolerance and understand that different people have different life experiences and perspectives; however, in practice they tend to be quite close-minded when it comes to artistic expression. A piece of art that is anything but wholly conventional—that is “beautiful,” or “about self-expression,” and/or art that “tells an inspiring story”—often baffles or even angers them. When asked to take seriously a work of art that actively resists values like beauty and expression, students react with annoyance and dismissive comments, often describing such a work as “weird for the sake of being weird,” or saying that the artist in question “is probably an asshole.” In the wake of the 2016 Presidential election, I found myself more unwilling than usual simply to expose my students to pretty, tuneful, inspiring, or otherwise affirmative works of art, and so in this semester of the class I chose to confront them with work that actively refuses these values. Because the students have been powerfully enculturated to believe that attempting to understand difference is a good thing, they are usually willing to attempt to answer the question about what an artwork is asking them to see, notice, think about, or feel, when the question is posed directly to them as an imaginative exercise.

It would be hard to emphasize strongly enough the total lack of faith in their own ability to “understand” art that this student population manifests. I see their quickness to dismiss “weird” art not as a coherent value judgment on their parts, but rather as a kind of escape route; by immediately asserting that a work is pointless trash, they are released from the responsibility of grappling with it and perhaps coming to the “wrong” conclusion about it. However, I have found that discussing dissonant, unpleasant, or otherwise “weird” art can, paradoxically, make students feel empowered: if I show them a piece of art that makes them uncomfortable, and then it turns out that it was *supposed* to make them uncomfortable, they feel validated in their initial reactions, and are then more willing to dig deeper. Freire writes about students’ distrust of their own abilities, associating it with the “ideology of oppression” that the banking model of education promotes and relies upon. “Almost never do they realize that they, too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men.”<sup>12</sup> Validating students’ subjective responses to

12. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 63.

art—even, or perhaps especially, when those responses are negative—can help them see that they too have the potential to develop critical interpretive skills, and that they too already “know things.”

One of the required events that I chose in order to explore the theme of discomfort was among the most challenging events I have ever programmed for this class: a screening of Bill Morrison’s 2002 experimental film *Decasia* with a live performance of the score composed by Michael Gordon. *Decasia* is an extremely challenging experience for Lively Arts students because it is difficult to ascertain “what the artwork asks of us.” The score for the film was composed first—in a reversal of traditional scoring practices—and Morrison created the film to accompany the music. Gordon’s score is highly dissonant and repetitive and uses dynamics in what might be called a “confrontational” way. Sections of repeated, dissonant material grow slowly into head-splitting crescendos, punctuated by jarringly unpredictable brass blasts and washes of distorted electric guitar. Even the quieter, gentler moments provoke anxiety and unease; in one movement the string section in *Decasia* is required to play hundreds of measures of slow, quiet, creepy glissandi without stopping, creating a cumulative effect that is quite stressful to hear.

Morrison’s film is a silent collage of literally decaying footage that he recovered from various archives around the country. The images are eerie, ghostly visions from the past that are often obscured by psychedelic blobs of organic decay. *Decasia* does not “tell a story” in any conventional sense and it is highly repetitive. We see the same images again and again, and, since these clips have been removed from their original contexts, it is difficult at times for the viewer even to understand what they are seeing. In one clip, for example, camels walk slowly across a sand dune; in another what appear to be miners frantically dig someone out of a hole in the ground; and in another a series of children sitting on a school bus turn their heads to regard the camera with steady, serious expressions.

The repetition that characterizes both the visual imagery and the music provides a fruitful ground for engaging with both time and discomfort. In the preparatory lecture I gave before students attended the live screening, I introduced various works of minimalist music as a means of getting students to think about both touchstones and how music can evoke or interact with them, in order to provide students with some tools to help them negotiate these pieces. I began by playing essentially consonant works, then slowly moved through more and more dissonant pieces, and concluded with excerpts from *Decasia* itself. I first played a recording of Steve Reich’s *Music for Mallet Instruments*, and solicited responses from the students. They initially pointed out how repetitive the music was, with some students identifying this repetition as “boring” and other students calling it “relaxing.” I encouraged them to continue building on these



observations, asking them to describe the repetition and their responses to it using clear, specific language. For example, if a student says the piece is boring, I ask, “what about it is boring?” Over the course of perhaps ten minutes, we collectively built a framework for understanding the music as being somehow “about time,” because of the way it manifests a sense of constant motion but without ever arriving at a goal. At this point, asking the students to ponder “what this artwork asks of us” led to a fruitful discussion of goal-orientation. Might there be some reason for an artist to avoid “progress” as a compositional ethos? Isn’t there something potentially violent about the ideology of progress we all seem to ascribe to? What about the experience of goal-orientation in our own lives, does it cause us anxiety? Thus a discussion that began with Steve Reich became much more wide-ranging, ending up in a conversation about student loan debt.

I then introduced students to recordings of some of Michael Gordon’s music, including *Rewriting Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony* as well as *Decasia*. Having been primed by the preceding discussion, students were ready to make many insightful observations about this music, despite the fact that it is dissonant, disturbing, and “weird.” Students were able to clearly articulate some of the differences between Gordon’s and Reich’s use of repetition, for example, and were also able to come up with creative answers about “what this artwork asks of us.” I ended lecture by asking students to remember that the discomfort they would no doubt experience at the *Decasia* screening was an intentional effect—rather than a design flaw—of the work, and reminded them that if they became confused or upset, they should always re-center themselves by thinking about what the artwork wants them to think and feel; what might be some reasons for their discomfort? Furthermore, I asked them to take note of any seemingly unrelated ideas or thoughts that drifted through their minds during moments of boredom. Perhaps they would find that those thoughts had been generated in some way by the experience of sitting through *Decasia*. With these instructions, I hoped to activate some of the learning objectives of the class: empowering students to find their own thoughts interesting, and encouraging them to empathize with the artists and with their fellow audience members.

In general, the student response papers did indeed engage with some of these questions. Many students, for example, noted that they had been bored, but that they had tried to actively engage with their boredom via some of the exercises we had practiced in class. Many papers brought up themes from lecture: most of them spent at least some time discussing the way they experienced the discomfort—both aural and visual—of the screening. Many also followed the three-tiered approach to aesthetic encounters outlined in the course guide, and came up with creative, insightful interpretations of what they experienced. Most importantly, many students actively tried to answer the question “what

does the artwork ask of me,” and some even explicitly included this question in their own prose.

My favorite paper was written by a student who had been the most outspoken in asserting his belief that, in his words, “art is just made up,” and that dissonant works like *Decasia* “are just weird for the sake of being weird.” He was very vocal in class about how unpleasant he found the music and how pointless he felt the film was. However, this student in many respects represents the ideal student for a class like this, because despite his vocal opposition to nearly every work of art I introduced in class, he was also absolutely open to trying new things and to actually practicing the interpretive approaches I encouraged. His *Decasia* paper exemplifies the process of learning “how to learn,” as well as how to be open to difference rather than resisting it. The paper charts an empathic narrative, from confusion and resistance to some sort of catharsis. The student began by describing his unwillingness to attend the event and his dread of sitting through it (“As I sat there waiting for the show to start, I was very bitter, expecting the showing to be a bunch of uncontrolled nonsense, with no point other than to just be weird.”). However, he then described his slow realization that rather than simply being a wash of uncontrolled nonsense, the film—as well as the music—actually had recurring themes and that the repetition of these themes was itself part of the meaning of the work. Although I have corrected some minor spelling errors, I have left the student’s original syntax and grammar intact in order to more accurately convey the student’s thought processes:

One clip that highlighted this was the video of women being dunked into a lake in what I perceived to be a witch trial. This scene was accompanied by particularly outlandish music with huge bass drums beating in a way that seemed to make absolutely no sense but were clearly composed. I felt like they were playing the complete wrong beat because it sounded horrible and hurt to hear. This scene emphasizes what’s wrong with humans all going along with the same nature as a witch trial simply makes no sense other than society banding together to find a scapegoat. It is the epitome of what is wrong with repeating yourself and others.

By engaging with musical dissonance and his own discomfort throughout his paper, this student continually opened up avenues for interpretation and emotional response. Near the end of his paper, he described a particularly intense moment:

My favorite part of the entire production ironically came during the segment we viewed in class that I had criticized so heavily. This is due to the unbelievable music that the orchestra played during this segment. I don’t think I will ever know how they got regular instruments to create such insane

sounds. Since when does a trombone sound like a freaking train? There were these horns that sounded like a streaking fire alarm, the bass drum with this powerful BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM, the damn train whistle trombones and who knows what else. It all rushed at me and I was nowhere near prepared. I wouldn't say I cried, but I shed more than a couple of tears. I have no idea why; the only way I can explain it is there was so much contained emotion inside of me that it started leaking out of my eyes.

The musical moment this passage describes is extraordinarily difficult to sit through, even for me, though I have heard the piece many times. Yet not only does the student describe it accurately—the trombones do sound like train whistles; the horns do sound like fire alarms; and the bass drum is pounded so loudly it feels like a physical assault—but he also experienced it as revelatory. Other student reaction papers were less enthusiastic, but overall I was impressed by the sincerity and clarity of the writing. Students approached *Decasia* with a willingness to try to carefully observe and articulate their own response to repetition, boredom, and discomfort as well as to try to understand why the artists may have wanted them to have such an experience. Ideally, experiences that ask students to engage thoughtfully with discomfort, confusion, or dissonance encourage them to be open minded when encountering unexpected or unfamiliar things of all kinds, not only strange or uncomfortable works of art but also different people, cultures, and ideas.

### **Close Listening via Graphic Transcription**

Where the *Decasia* screening gave students the confidence to begin interpreting difficult art, I also wanted to provide them with concrete vocabularies to describe music, as well as with the ability to approach listening as an active practice. It was also important to me to engage the students' creative faculties in the projects that they completed for the class; after seeing *Decasia*, they wrote an essay, but I also wanted to challenge them to engage with a different kind of creative work. To this end, my teaching assistants and I designed an assignment that required students to listen closely many times to a small clip of music, and then to design a system of notation that could visually represent this clip. Students had to overcome the discomfort and boredom of repetitive listening in order to actively construct a piece of visual art that responded to what they heard.

In an article about designing productive homework assignments, musicologist Eleonora Beck writes:

Once students understand that music's mysterious properties liberate its study to multifaceted, informed interpretations, a

magical world is revealed to them, and it is the object of the teacher to allow students their opinions and teach them to have confidence in their ways of thinking and feeling.<sup>13</sup>

The graphic transcription assignment asks students to recognize these multifarious properties of music, and also encourages them to articulate their own personal understanding of their chosen work. The assignment is particularly well suited to the student population of this class, because it combines rigorous, empirical observation and notation (which they love) with more interpretive thinking and the necessity to make creative decisions without a lot of guidance (which they find challenging). For the assignment, I give students a choice of four contemporary pop/electronic/hip hop songs, which are posted as YouTube links on the course Moodle page. Once they have chosen their song, students are asked to listen to it and pick one minute from it that they would like to notate. They are given a prompt with clear instructions (see **Appendix B**), and a template in which to hand-draw their transcribed score (although they are also given the option to design their own template). This assignment requires close listening, a skill I emphasize throughout the semester in both concrete and abstract ways.

Students are accustomed to thinking of songs as commercial products they consume. In addition to teaching traditional musical elements, therefore, I also programmed a class intended to focus on listening as a complex, actively creative practice, rather than simply as a means of consuming a product. To prepare for this class, students had read an excerpt from Pauline Oliveros’s *Deep Listening*, and we began by discussing it. Oliveros associates close listening with empathy and with a radical way of being in the present; she promotes deep listening as a meditative practice, one that can connect practitioners to themselves, to others, and to the earth. As is usual in this class, students first responded to many of these ideas with derision. They found the group listening exercise that Oliveros outlines as a means to promote telepathy to be especially silly. But after some discussion of these ideas, I asked students to talk about their own experiences of being in time: about the extent to which they felt themselves to be future-oriented, past-oriented, or simply living in the present. What factors, I asked, contributed to these temporal experiences? Students became voluble, talking about how distracted they felt by money worries, cell phones, social media, and by the myriad demands on their time made by school and their jobs (many UMass students work full time while also being full time students). They expressed anxiety about the fragmentation of their attention and their time,

13. Eleonora M. Beck, “Assignments and Homework,” in *The Music History Classroom*, ed. James A. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 61–81.

and about the way that their worries interfered with their ability to focus fully on a given task or activity.

At this point in the discussion, I performed John Cage's *4'33"* at the piano, asking the students to think about some of Oliveros's ideas as well as some of the themes from our discussion while they listened. My students were, as always, confused and shocked by the revelation that this work is considered an important one in music history. However, when asked to talk about what they had noticed during the performance—i.e., when they tried to answer the question “what does the artwork ask of you”—they were able to generate an insightful list of observations and responses. Students noted not only that they had become aware of classroom and building noises they had never noticed or really thought about before, but also the “human body noises” that normally would be too quiet to hear. I brought the discussion back to the theme of discomfort. Why did they think that sitting in silence together was so uncomfortable? Students again came up with observations about goal-orientation and temporality: it is weird to just sit and do nothing; usually when strangers are in a room together they are doing something. I asked if anyone had experienced telepathy. They laughed, but at the same time, after *4'33"* they were more amenable to the idea that sitting quietly in a group does increase one's awareness of other people and of oneself as a member of a group rather than as an isolated, goal-oriented individual.

These heady conversation topics may seem tangential to the graphic score assignment, which after all is very concrete. However, one of the background goals of this assignment is to cue students to think about listening itself—how they usually listen, other practices of listening, and the ways that different kinds of listening promote different kinds of being in time. These conversations, and this assignment, represent an attempt to counter the myriad distractions that face students in their daily lives; I hoped that by listening over and over again to a single minute of music, students would enter a zone of concentration similar to the ones Oliveros describes in her book. I also intended this assignment to potentially create boredom; in class, we discussed the way listening repeatedly to the same bit of music can be boring, and collectively generated some productive ways to embrace and negotiate this boredom, and to stay awake and aware within it.

I am amazed by the students' creative solutions in constructing their scores. I have attached one student's score for the FKA Twigs song “Two Weeks” as **Appendix C**. In her score, she precisely notates several specific elements in the song's production but also uses the graphic of a waveform to indicate the affective trajectory of the song as it proceeds. Another student who was a Chemistry major decided to associate each of the sounds in his chosen song with an element or chemical compound that the sound reminded him of (e.g.

a resonating, high-pitched, clear sound reminded him of glass). He then used these elemental or chemical symbols to represent those sounds in his score. I am always fascinated to see which aspects of a given song different students focus on. The scores by students who chose the song “Two Weeks” by F.K.A. Twigs revealed the very different musical aspects to which they were innately drawn: one score did nothing but convey the entire rhythm track with extraordinarily painstaking accuracy, while another score focused almost exclusively on the emotional effect generated by the various musical elements (the synthesizer was soothing, and was depicted as blue waves; the glitched snare sound emphasized moments of transcendence, and was depicted as a series of red throbbing hearts). In the accompanying essays in which students explained the choices they made, many commented on how difficult the assignment was. Indeed, in the informal feedback I solicit from them on the last day of class, the majority of students identify this as the hardest assignment of the semester. But they also discussed the project’s revelatory potential—their amazement that after listening to their chosen minute thirty or forty times, they suddenly noticed a whole new musical element that they had never noticed before. Some also discussed their personal journeys while working on the assignment, as they moved from irritation and distraction to a place of quiet peacefulness. On the whole, students’ essays charted narratives of self-empowerment, tracing a passage from initial feelings of alienation and boredom to a sense of triumph in having fully understood their chosen minute of music. Some students wove higher revelations into their essays, noting for example that they had never before paid attention to the percussion tracks on their favorite songs, and had not realized how intricate such tracks often are. This assignment also promoted a certain degree of empathy; in some cases students gained a sense of appreciation for the craft of music-making.

### **Monetization and the Technical Fetish: Conceptual Music and Performance Art**

As I noted in my introduction, cultural assessments of the value of the arts and humanities often tend to instrumentalize them, either dismissing them for their supposed failure to contribute anything to students’ future job preparation, or defending them on these same terms. Student attitudes in Lively Arts reflect these broader cultural trends; my students tend to be very focused on money and/or technical skill as the basis for judging works of art, and indeed for judging their own activities, including their education. For example, while they find Jeff Koons’s giant silver balloon dog sculptures silly, their dismissal turns to reverence when they learn how much these sculptures garner on the art market. Art works that display very clear technical skill are the ones

students respond to most positively, in every art form. Additionally, if art works display very clear technical skill (for example, Vermeer's photorealistic paintings, a ballerina dancing *en pointe*, or a Paganini caprice) they are impressed; if an artwork actively resists such technical skill (for example, a Jackson Pollock painting, Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" or Cage's 4'33"), they are disgusted. In the seven semesters that I have taught this class, I would say that this twinned impasse—the worship of money and technical skill—is the hardest one to overcome. I think these values go hand in hand; both are aspects of North America's technocratic approach to life, in which outcomes and qualities must be quantifiable. Wendy Brown discusses the way such "economization" penetrates every sphere of our lives under neoliberalism, noting the way that both conservative and progressive goals tend to be figured in exclusively monetary (rather than moral or ethical) terms: e.g., we should work to end poverty and homelessness because they are bad for the economy, rather than because such conditions diminish human beings' ability to live with dignity and freedom.<sup>14</sup> The physical difficulty of playing Paganini is easy to perceive and to describe, and it makes sense to students that the performers who are able to play Paganini the fastest and most accurately are "the best" musicians, thus deserving of the fame and fortune they have presumably accrued. By contrast, the brilliance of an abstract idea or of an artwork that challenges our commitment to technical skill cannot be demonstrated empirically. For my students, such ideas or works are impossible to *value* and are, therefore, worthless.

I challenge the extreme monetization of students' value system as well as their fetishization of technique throughout the course, by asking them to reflect on the things in their own lives that can't or shouldn't be monetized or that can't be valued in terms of technical skill, such as love, altruism, and appreciation for nature and the Earth.<sup>15</sup> I ask them to think about what an artistic value system that was not based on money or technique might look like. I put this question in empathic terms: why might someone actively want to create art that resists one or both of these value systems? Most of my students identify "getting a job so they can make money" as a primary goal of their lives. This is understandable, given not only the kind of economization of values Brown identifies but also the urgent necessity of paying off their enormous student loan debts. It can be difficult to challenge students' focus on financial profit; yet asking them to imagine alternative perspectives not only promotes empathy but may also help them to envision different potential realities. What might our world look like,

14. See Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), particularly chapter three, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy" (37–59) for a longer exegesis of this idea.

15. See Debra Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not Be For Sale: The Moral Limits of Markets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

if money wasn't a primary goal? What would we do differently? What different approaches would we take toward education and the way we employ our time?

In pursuing these questions, I have begun programming more and more conceptual and performance art in my classes, because this kind of work tends to present the toughest challenge to students' monetized value systems and insistence on technical skill. I also expose them to art in which the “product” is simply the practice of making.<sup>16</sup> For example, I show them photographs and videos of the work of Andy Goldsworthy, who simply walks out into a given landscape, gathers together elements he finds in it—sticks, leaves, rocks, icicles—creates objects or structures with them, and then observes the changes wrought upon those structures by time. Goldsworthy asks us to think about impermanence, change, and the fleeting transience of whatever marks human beings make on the earth, and he also challenges the commodification of artworks in the contemporary art market—much of his work can not be bought, sold, owned, or even seen in person by anyone but himself.<sup>17</sup> Students respond positively to Goldsworthy because on one level his art asks us to notice “the beauty that exists in nature,” an idea students are amenable to; their initially positive responses to the aesthetic of his work makes it easier to engage them in discussions about the work's bigger philosophical implications.

While Goldsworthy makes physical objects that are then changed or destroyed by time, sounding music exists *solely* in time, and never takes physical form. Many scholars have noted that music's very nature makes it resistant to commodification.<sup>18</sup> For Theodor W. Adorno, for example, the ungraspable aspects of music were potential sites for radical critique; composers' attempts to construct an “autonomous” music represented their struggle against commodification and thus their yearning for subjective freedom.<sup>19</sup> Adorno's writing itself is too thorny to assign in *Lively Arts*, but I raise these ideas during class discussions, as a means of drawing students' attention to the ways the system in which we live structures not only our choices and decisions but also the ways we ascribe value.

Once these concepts are introduced, students are willing to engage with musical ideas that initially seem silly to them. After introducing them to Goldsworthy's work, and to ideas about commodification and monetization, I

16. Phil Ford discusses the idea of art as practice in the final chapter of *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 178–215.

17. I do, however, engage students with the ambivalences presented by the very fact of Goldsworthy's career: his artworks themselves are not commodifiable, yet his beautiful photographs of them are, and indeed, selling glossy books and prints of these photographs comprises much of his income.

18. See Ford, *Dig*, 222.

19. See Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006 [1949]).



ask students to try to envision what a musical work might be like if its composer undertook an approach to sonic creation similar to the one that Goldsworthy takes towards sculpture and other visual arts. Students come up with a variety of intriguing ideas: they suggest that someone could create and perform a musical work alone and never play it for others; they imagine music played for free and not recorded, so that the concert would exist only in the moment of its performance and only for the people who had been present at that moment; they sometimes take my question more literally and suggest that a person could go out into nature and make music using rocks and sticks.

Such conceptual art also helps students step back from their obsession with technical skill. Having already explored Goldsworthy's work and ideas about separating practice from products, students are primed to take on even more challenging art. Students in this class often proclaim they are unable to understand what the point of a work of art is if it took no technical skill to create—even Goldsworthy's objects and structures display clear evidence of his skill and deftness, which is one reason students are more amenable to discussing his work's headier implications. One surefire way to shake students out of their belief that art lacking technical skill is unimportant, meaningless, or incapable of "expression" is to show and play them examples of performance art that demand intense, even instinctive, response. In the Spring 2017 semester I gave a lecture combining discussions of Yoko Ono's "Cut Piece" and Philip Corner's "Piano Pieces" in order to expose students to such art and the ideas it can generate.

In "Cut Piece," Ono kneels silently on a stage, in front of a pair of scissors. The audience is instructed to come up onstage and cut off parts of her clothing. I showed students a famous performance of the work (filmed by the Maysles brothers) that took place in 1966.<sup>20</sup> This performance begins quietly with audience members coming one by one onto the stage and gently snipping off small scraps of Ono's skirt. The performance builds in intensity when a male audience member begins cutting more drastically, sawing away at the front of Ono's blouse, tearing the blouse away from her shoulders, exposing her brassiere, and then brusquely cutting the straps holding her bra up; all the while, Ono remains motionless, her facial expression blank. Finally, the audience itself stops the performance, by voicing a collective outrage at the man.

When I asked students "What does this artwork ask of us?" they generated many different answers. Perhaps the piece is a comment on women's powerlessness within patriarchy; or it might be a comment on the audience's responsibility with regard to the art they consume. Maybe it performs some sort of a statement about how putting art into the world makes an artist feel naked

20. Performances of Ono can be viewed on YouTube.

and violated; or maybe it is about art itself, and the long history of male artists obsessively depicting women’s naked bodies. “Cut Piece” takes no real technical skill to perform (although one student correctly pointed out that it takes “guts”), but its impact is visceral, and even students who feel strongly that art is meaningless unless it displays technical skill find themselves affected after watching it, and are able to use those feelings to interpret the work. “Cut Piece” inspires empathy as students are disturbed by it, and when asked “what does this artwork want from us,” they challenge themselves to move beyond their personal discomfort into bigger picture ideas the work generates. After “Cut Piece,” it is easy to engage students in discussions of art that move away from valuing technique; they know, now, that they have been affected by a work that took no technical skill to create, and this realization makes them more open to other art that rejects technique, even art that is less intensely affecting.

Directly after discussing “Cut Piece,” I introduced students to Philip Corner’s “Piano Pieces,” a conceptual, performance-based work from 1962 in which a group of people saws a piano in half. Of course, students find this hilarious and wild, but after seeing the Ono performance they are well prepared to take it seriously. Having just witnessed “Cut Piece,” in fact, students are quick to note the politically-charged similarities between the two works; in each of them, men violently destroy something, either by tearing and ripping a woman’s clothing or by hacking away at a piano. When asked “what does this artwork ask of us,” students generate insightful readings of the piece, observing for example that pianos represent “high class” art and that there is something revolutionary about destroying that symbol in a performance. “Piano Pieces” is also a productive composition to discuss with students because they quickly perceive that not only is technical skill not required to perform the work, but that the work itself seems to be *about* technical skill in some way. Students raised questions about skill itself, for example, asking whether effectively sawing a piano in half requires skill and in what way(s) that kind of skill is similar to the skill required to play a piano. This line of questioning also led one student to suggest that perhaps sawing a piano in half *is* “playing” the piano—“who gets to say what ‘playing’ an instrument should look like?” this student asked.

These kinds of discussions can be empowering for the student population of this class, who often describe themselves as “not creative” and “not able to understand art.” Artworks like “Cut Piece” and “Piano Pieces” help students to realize that a great deal of art—both its creation and its appreciation—is more about ideas, thoughts, or politics than it is about the documentation of technical skill, awe-inspiring and wonderful though technical skill can of course be. Imaginative works like these require active participation from viewers, who must challenge themselves to glimpse new worlds of possibility for what might constitute “art.” In turn, these acts of imagination may open up new avenues for

thinking about life itself: Who has told me that my life needs to look a certain way? How else might I imagine my life?

### **Outcomes and Conclusion**

Student responses at the end of the semester vary, of course. Some students never engage with the material or enter into the discussions, no matter how many times I ask them to or try to discuss with them why they are so reticent. It would be laughable to claim that this class changes the lives of every student who takes it; however, every semester there are at least a few students who undergo genuine transformation. This is evident in the papers and creative assignments they turn in over the course of the semester, as well as in the comments they write in their course evaluations, and, sometimes, in emails to me. Some of these students continue to write to me for months and even years afterward, usually because they want to tell me about an exciting artwork they experienced that reminded them of our class.

One student's final paper for the Spring 2017 semester may serve to illustrate an aspect of music's transformative role in engaged pedagogy, because it concretely depicts a process of self-empowerment. This student did excellent work all semester, but she always described herself (in her papers as well as during class discussions and in office hours) as someone who was unable to interpret or understand art. She was never hostile or resistant—she simply felt she was never able to have a “smart” thought about anything I showed in class. The final required event of the semester was a performance put on by the graduating seniors in the school's dance program. My student began her paper on this event by describing how surprised she always was in lecture when other students would suggest readings of artworks, because she never felt she was able to come to such readings on her own. She described this ability to interpret a work of art as “magic” and said it seemed completely unavailable to her, even though once someone else suggested an interpretation it always made sense to her. In illustrating this point, she wrote about a moment in one lecture when I played a clip from a live performance of Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*:

One person in class raised their hand and created this whole theme relating to women in the workplace and the unfair gender stereotypes in America. I was completely thrown off. How could someone get all that just from a performance that, in my opinion, was nothing but visually and audibly hypnotizing? I envied this girl, I wished I could see all the things that she saw in that moment. I thought of her as the first dance began, and I tried to really open my mind to new ways of understanding dance.

Her paper went on to describe a moment that amazed her. While watching one of the dances in the performance and feeling uncomfortable because of

the repetition and dissonance it displayed, she realized that she was “thinking of something else” during it, and that this “something else” was actually *about* the dance. In fact, she had created in her mind a storyline about what it takes to make it as a dancer, inspired by the movement set against a background of dissonant sounds. Surprised by her line of thinking, she writes, did I just interpret dance? For the first moments of the show I was sitting there thinking I don’t get this, how will I write a paper about this. But as it went on and I really allowed myself to think deeply about each aspect of the dance and of the music... I began to create this story. Suddenly I realized that I did what that girl had done in lecture the other day, I think I “get it.”

In both of the student papers quoted in this article, it is striking to see the way that musical dissonance provided an avenue toward understanding. Having been exposed to dissonant, uncomfortable sounds and images throughout the semester, and having been shown how to process and engage with that discomfort rather than reject it outright, some students found themselves able to make sense of experiences that would once have been opaque and alienating.

Engaging disparate musical works with the question, “What does this artwork ask of me?” opens up productive avenues for encouraging empathy and student empowerment. Lively Arts weaves together various artistic practices with an eye toward the “background goals” of helping students learn to find their own thoughts interesting; helping them learn how to have an aesthetic encounter and become empowered to develop ideas about that encounter; encouraging them to practice encountering difference with an open mind; and showing them how to be curious about the world and self-aware in their interactions with the world. These practices encourage empathy: by asking themselves what *Decasia* or an abstract dance performance want them to notice or think about, students learn to practice empathic engagement with any strange, different, or uncomfortable idea or expression they encounter in their lives. The discussions and projects students undertake also promote self-empowerment: engaging with discomfort can reveal students to themselves, and provide them an avenue for interrogating their own reactions and feelings, and, ultimately, discovering that they are capable of creative, interpretive, critical thinking.

## Appendix A: Guide to Encountering Art

Perception:

1. What do you *objectively* notice, in a given piece of art?
2. Learn to perceive and name the *tangible* elements present in a work. At a jazz concert, for example, some things we can objectively describe might be: what instruments are present? Are there singers, or only instruments? How are the performers arranged on the stage? What is the lighting like? Is the music: fast or slow? Loud or soft? How do the performers relate to one another onstage?

Response:

1. What do you *subjectively* notice, in a given piece of art?
2. Learn to identify and describe the emotions, reactions, and associations that are evoked in you, *personally*, by the work. At the same concert, some subjective observations might be: the trumpet seems like the main instrument; the drummer was scary; the first song sounded happy but by the end of the show I felt sad; I felt like the trumpet was lonely

Evaluation:

1. Here, you move beyond your personal reactions. How can the objective and subjective observations about the given work be used to create an *analysis* of the work? Combine the first two modes of observation to create your overall “explanation” of the work.
2. Learn to identify which aspects of a work are most interesting/important to you, and how to explain why using the objective and subjective qualities you’ve already identified. Which aspects of the piece can you point to, to demonstrate your “reading” or main impression of the piece? Perhaps you’ve identified the *objective* criteria of the concert—e.g. there are four performers, no lyrics, a trumpet soloist, etc. Then you’ve noted some *subjective* responses—the trumpet seemed lonely; at first the music seemed happy but later was sad. In your *evaluation*, you’ll try to build on these observations to present a *reading* that you find interesting. For example, something like: “The concert seemed to tell a story of one man’s journey into loneliness, because the trumpet started out playing in harmony with the other instruments, but slowly became more and more of a solo instrument.”

## Appendix B: Graphic Transcription Assignment

Choose a one-minute segment from one of the following works: FKA Twigs, “Two Weeks”; tUnE-yArDs, “Bizness”; Erykah Badu, “Phone Down”; and Kate Bush, “Running up that Hill.” Listen to the whole song first, before you choose the minute you want to notate—your one-minute segment can be taken from anywhere in the song; it does NOT have to be the first minute!!!! Please specifically use the video version of the song posted on Moodle. Make up your own graphic notation to create a score that reflects what you hear in this minute of music. Then write a 400–500 word essay describing your transcription: what decisions did you make, and why? What aspects of the song most interested you, and how did you depict them visually? What was most challenging or interesting about making your score? etc.

Specific Requirements and Directions:

1. Once you’ve chosen your one-minute segment, listen to it carefully many, many times, making note of what you notice about the melody(ies), rhythm, and texture. These three elements will be the foundation of your score, although you will add others as well.
2. Create symbols (lines, shapes, dots, whatever works for your understanding of the music) that you will use to denote *pitch and rhythm*. Also, create a way to indicate *texture* (each individual instrument or voice), and *melody* (every sound has a pitch; but some pitches strung together make a “melody” that your ear grasps and follows; a song can have more than one melody going on at once).
3. Once you have decided on your basic framework, add *colors* to symbolize aspects of the song that you think are important or interesting. Colors could be used to indicate *timbre, mood, texture, consonance/dissonance, melody*, etc. Please use at least two colors, although feel free to use more than two!
4. If you like, you could create a key for your score—a chart breaking down which symbols/colors you used to indicate which elements. Only do this if it seems like it would help you stay organized. If you do make a key, please turn it in along with the score and essay.
5. Create your score. You may use the template provided on the course website (print out the template, then draw your score by hand onto it). The template contains four rectangles with each rectangle representing 15 seconds of your one-minute excerpt. Please time stamp above each bar to indicate the section of music you are notating (e.g. 0:25–0:55). (Remember, you must use the YouTube link for your song that’s on Moodle)

You are welcome to use this template; but you are also welcome to envision a different way of notating your minute of music. If you want to come up with a different format for your score—if you don't like the time-stamped rectangles of the provided template—please feel free to do so! Any way you choose to realize your score is fine, so long as your score includes all the above requirements, and you explain your choices clearly in your essay.

6. Write a 400–500 word essay explaining how the shapes, figures, and colors you chose to use in your score reflect the specific musical elements you heard in your selection. Be sure to refer to the Music Portfolio Project grading rubric (on Moodle) to make sure all criteria are met.

Feel free to be very creative with your score. You can be very free with this assignment, so long as we are able to follow your score, and you're able to clearly describe why you took the approach you took, and why you chose the symbols/colors/etc. you chose. Students have come up with all kinds of really interesting, creative approaches to this assignment—if you have a cool idea but are unsure whether it's okay or not, just check with your section instructor!

Appendix C: Sample Graphic Transcription (F.K.A. Twigs, “Two Weeks”)

