

MUS 555: Topics in 20th Century Music: Music, Modernism, Nature
Instructor: Stephen Smith | Tuesday, 1pm – 3:50pm

This seminar explores how modernist music and musical thought have responded to modern transformations in the ways that nature can be understood, represented, and experienced. Modernity, modernism, and nature are all famously fraught terms, and many of our readings will be devoted to exploring their often unstable meanings. Our historical frame will be broad, ranging from the early nineteenth century until the present day, though some of the materials we study will reach back into earlier periods. Among the themes we will consider are the following: the emergence of modern concepts of nature within histories of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism; modernity as a material transformation of nature on a planetary scale; the role that modern visions of nature have played in constructions of biological racism and the biopolitical management of populations; and the advent of modern ecological thought with its vision of the nature as a web of life. Through historical case studies chosen by the instructor and by students, we will ask about the many ways that musical works, practices, or events, as well as writings about music, have been related to these mutations of nature. And we will ask also about the many things it might mean to be a modernist when faced with what nature becomes in modernity. Readings may be drawn from philosophy, music history, ethnomusicology, decolonial studies, black studies, and critical ecology. Grades will be based upon a research paper, attendance and participation, reading responses, and in-class presentations.

This seminar is primarily intended for MA and PhD students. Any MM or DMA students may enroll with permission from Prof. Smith; MM and DMA students must also check with their large ensemble instructor to see if this course would conflict with the ensemble's rehearsal schedule. If it will conflict, the student must check with the course instructor if absences for this reason would be permitted. For students in the MA/PhD in Critical Music Studies track, it satisfies the Elective Group 2 requirement. For DMA students, it fulfills the Elective Group 1 requirement.

3 credits