

MUS 557: Topics in Theory – Absolute Music/Bare Sound
Instructor: August Sheehy | Thursday, 3:30pm – 6:20pm

The term “absolute music” was first used in the mid-nineteenth century to criticize music disconnected from social and political life. Yet it quickly acquired a new meaning—and value—as music that ostensibly transcended not only politics, but history tout court. Of course, as we know, to disavow politics is to stake out a political position, and our politics unfold in historical time.

Although virtually no one uses the term “absolute music” uncritically today, the legacy of the idea is all around us—in institutions, pedagogies, and attitudes toward music that extend well beyond the purview of European classical music. In this seminar, we will evaluate this legacy through a review of the literature that addresses it directly (e.g., Dahlhaus, Chua, Hoeckner, Bonds). At the same time, we will inquire in particular into its function within the discipline of music theory. Or, to put this the question in a Foucauldian register: how did the concept *discipline* music theory? Animating this inquiry will be the apparent paradox between music theorists’ treatment of music as mere “organized sound” and its power over their (our) imaginations.

This course is primarily intended for MA and PhD students, and it fulfills the Elective Group 3 requirement for students in the MA or PhD Critical Music Studies track. With the permission of the instructor, interested MM or DMA students may enroll in the course, which fulfills the Elective Group 2 requirement.

3 credits