

MUS 536, Area Studies in Ethnomusicology – The Force of Quiet (in Music and Beyond)

Instructor: Benjamin Tausig | Tuesday, 9:30am – 12:20pm

Quiet and silence are powerful forces in music, as they are in all sonic expression. Rests, the spaces between notes, pregnant pauses, words left unsaid, and silent meditation are just a few examples of the ways that not sounding can be just as powerful, if not more so, than sounding. Silence has been theorized in music and sound studies, and this course will explore that literature, from the writings and composition of John Cage to recent treatments of silence in protest gatherings. We will also turn our attention to quiet, a subtly different topic that has been taken up in queer studies, Black studies, and Asian and Asian-American studies as a way of understanding the power of muted or unheard expressions. As Gayatri Spivak famously noticed, not all sound -- no matter how loud -- will be heard in a given field of political action. Why is this the case? How can we analyze sound that is framed as not mattering? What power might exist in the expressions of the unheard? We will consider case studies and exciting new theories from a variety of fields to trace how quiet and silence function and make a difference.

Coursework includes weekly readings Brightspace postings, one presentation on a piece or case study, and a final paper (with formal presentation).

This course is suitable for all students. For DMA students, it fulfills the Elective Group I requirement. For students in the MA or PhD track in Critical Music Studies, it satisfies the Elective Group I requirement. Interested MM students may enroll with permission of the instructor. Interested MMs must also contact the Graduate Program Director for approval.

3 credits