

Assignment

Music 105

Spring, 2008

“Discussion Questions”

Due by class Thursday, March 27.

Hand in electronically to me, Thursday morning.

Write a paragraph or two each in answer to any 5 the following questions. You may freely combine the questions, and slightly alter the question if you like, but try to specifically answer the questions.

Avoid two types of reference: “to me, music is...” and “studies show, music is...”. In other words, I am *not* interested (for the moment, in this particular assignment) in your personal experience/feeling/aesthetic nor in specific citations of empirical evidence. The viewpoint I *am* interested in is more or less the one we talked about in class — one that is useful in posing and answering questions regarding innate capacity, predilection, universality, and propensity on a large, humanity-wide scale.

As an example, in answer to the question “What is music?” responses like “Music is whatever someone calls music” or “Music is all sounds” or “Music is chill!” don’t help us much, though all are interesting and important (especially for us as composers). But for the purposes of a class called “origins of music” we will assume, for this spring term, that for humans at least there is something called “music”: recognizable, delimited, more or less generally agreed upon, distinguished from “not-music” (but not necessarily the same for all sub-groupings of the species). I won’t hold you to your definitions in any way other than as a way to try and begin the conversation.

I want you to think great thoughts — broadly, globally, and if need be, cross-specifically. There’ll be plenty of time for anecdotes and empirical evidence later.

Please send me your writings (put your name on it, write in complete sentences, etc.) electronically by Thursday morning, so that I can make copies for everyone. We’ll read them and argue about them all in class.

Questions (pick 5)

- What is music?
- What is language?
- Why did music evolve, what adaptive function does it have?
- Is music a language?
- Does music have meaning?
- Does music have grammar (and is there, in a Chomskyian sense, a “universal grammar” for music)?
- Assume we know that some musical capacity or propensity is innate, preferred, is strong, some is weak. Or were to know that some specific musical ability evolved for a very specific reason. What are the implications of that knowledge for us as musicians? Should we use that capacity more, or less, or...?
- What is an emotion? Can we say that music has an “emotional meaning”?
- Is music a human-specific activity?
- What do you think are a few of the innately musical capacities that humans possess? For example, can all humans (leaving aside amusia for the moment) perceive *pitch height* differences at some level (some form of contour perception)? What else? Of the ones you mentioned, which are specific to music and thus not integral to language?