

**9735a: Fall 2021**  
**Special Topics in Musicology:**  
**RETHINKING MUSIC BIOGRAPHY**  
**Wednesdays, 1:30pm – 3:30pm, TC 310**

Instructor: Emily Abrams Ansari

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Office hours: Tuesdays, 2-4pm on Zoom, or in person by appointment

Office: TC222

### **Course Description**

The biography has traditionally been understood as a straightforwardly celebratory genre which, in music, considers a composer's life and works and their relationship to one another. What does biography look like, then, in a time when musicologists are actively challenging “great men” narratives, working to broaden representation, and adopting more critical and contextual lenses? After decades in which the biography medium was largely abandoned by “new musicologists,” how are musicologists today rethinking what music biography might look like? In this course, we look at recent music biographies that avoid hagiography and instead offer critical, contextualized, and even experimental assessments of their subject's music and life experiences. We consider recent scholarship on biography as a genre and then undertake close readings of recent biographies in music that seek to offer a more thoughtful, critical, and contextualized take on their subject's lives and music.

### **Objectives/Learning Outcomes**

1. Develop skills in critical reading and analysis of scholarly literature.
2. Obtain an understanding of current priorities and trends across the field of musicology, and the Humanities more broadly.
3. Improve scholarly writing skills.
4. Improve discursive and oral presentation skills for a range of contexts.

### **Readings**

For most weeks of this course, you will be responsible for reading an entire book-length biography. Often you will see on the schedule that half the class has one reading assignment (denoted as #1) and half has another (#2). You will be given the opportunity to sign up for your preferred choice of reading for each week after our first class.

Be aware then when biographies are assigned you will not be reading primarily for content: instead, you will be expected to read closely to assess modes of reasoning, structure, and use of evidence in the biography in question. You will need to set aside quite a bit of time for reading for this course each week.

Most of our readings, including many of the entire books assigned, are available in electronic form. Unless otherwise noted, readings (including books) are accessible electronically through the “course readings” page for our course, which you can access via the library website. A few books are only available in hard copy: these will be on reserve in the library and are denoted as such on the schedule. In several cases where we have hard copies only, two copies are available. I may also be able to lend my own copy, on occasion. If you are responsible for reading a hard copy book, please be in touch with

others assigned to read it to work out a schedule for when you will each borrow and read it. You might also consider buying some of our books for your collection, and to aid ease of access.

### **Evaluation**

Attendance and participation	15%
Group interview of a class visitor	10%
Book presentation in class	25%
Final project presentation	20%
Final project paper	30%

### **Participation**

Part of your participation grade (5%) will be self-assessed. The remaining 10% will be calculated by me and will be based on your attendance and participation in our weekly class discussions.

### **Group interview of a class visitor**

We will have several of the authors whose books we are reading this semester visit the class over Zoom for a half-hour interview. You will be assigned to ask questions in one of these interviews. You will need to work with the others assigned to this interview to put together questions for the visitor.

The questions should be motivated by the issues around biography discussed in the class thus far. You will likely also want to ask questions about specific structural/argumentative/writing style choices made by the author in their book.

### **Book presentation**

You will give a 15-20 minute presentation to the class about one of the biographies on our reading list to the class in the week in which that book is being discussed. You will be asked to examine the book closely, discuss its strengths and weaknesses as a biography, and speak to issues of structure, content selection, style, and organization.

### **Individual Project**

This project, which you will work on alone throughout the semester, can consider any topic relevant to the theme of this course. You might create your own article-length biographical study of a musician or musicians, adopting the strategies you have learned about; you could write a paper that considers a previous biographical study or studies (eg. biographies of a single musician/composer and their effect on that individual's reception); or you could contemplate the genre of biography in music through an historiographic or critical lens. (These are just possibilities, and I encourage you to come to me with your ideas.)

There are various stages to this project:

a) Submit a brief project proposal by email to Prof. Ansari by November 8. This should include a 1-2 paragraph overview of your planned project, and a provisional bibliography.

- b) Give a 15-20 minute presentation to the class during our last two meetings. This should provide an overview of your project and your argument, and perhaps zoom in on a few of the details.
- c) Write a 15-20 page paper and submit by email as an MS Word document to Prof. Ansari by midnight, December 15.

### Course policies

- **Enrollment** in this course is restricted to graduate students in Music, as well as any student who has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student's home program.
- This course is all about discussion and **participation**. If you miss classes without notifying me or are silent in class, this grade will be affected. If you cannot attend class for a degree-related or medical reason, please let me know in advance. Please come to each class having carefully considered the material listed in the syllabus and with plenty of critical perspectives to share with your colleagues. I encourage lively debate in class, so a wide variety of viewpoints will be very well received. I am always glad to hear opinions that differ from my own.
- The Graduate Program in Music recognizes that a student's ability to meet his/her academic responsibilities may, on occasion, be impaired by physical or mental illness. Illness may be acute (short term), or it may be chronic (long term), or chronic with acute episodes. The Graduate Program in Music further recognizes that physical or mental illness situations are deeply personal, and respects the need for privacy and confidentiality in these matters. In order to ensure fairness and consistency for all students, **academic accommodation** for work representing 10% or more of the student's overall grade in the course shall be granted only in those cases where there is documentation indicating that the student was seriously affected by illness and could not reasonably be expected to meet his/her academic responsibilities. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the office of the Associate Dean (Graduate Studies), not to the course instructor.
- As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their **health and wellness** a priority. Western provides several on-campus health-related services to help students achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing a graduate degree. "Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.
- Students with **special learning needs** or other circumstances are asked to inform the instructor as soon as possible so that necessary accommodations can be considered.
- Western is committed to achieving barrier-free **accessibility** for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program. Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education Western (AEW), a

confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AEW and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.

- Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. **Scholastic offences** are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic offence, as found at [https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)

## **Class schedule**

### September 8: What Is Biography?

Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. **\*This book is not available online and although it has been ordered for the library, will likely not be accessible in time. It is available from the major booksellers (Indigo and Amazon, for example) for purchase for \$11.95. There is also a purchasable e-book version, which the library was not able to obtain. If you do not wish to purchase it or are unable to please contact me to arrange access.\***

### September 15: Historiography of Music Biography I

Knott, Deborah. "Critical Reading Towards Critical Writing"

<https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/researching/critical-reading/>

Solomon, Maynard. "Biography." *Grove Music Online*. (Access through library website)

Cormac, Joanne. "Introduction: Music and Biography." *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 44/2 (2020): 61-66.

Wiley, Christopher and Paul Watt. "Musical Biography in the Musicological Arena."

*Journal of Musicological Research* 38/3-4 (2019): 187-92.

Jolanta T. Pekacz, "Introduction," in *Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms*, edited by Jolanta T. Pekacz. Aldershot: Routledge, 2006), 1-16.

*Discussion of critical reading of biographies: develop strategies list for analysis.*

### September 22: Challenging 'Great Men' Narratives

1. Bonds, Mark Evan. *Beethoven: Variations on a Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

OR 2. Talle, Andrew. *Beyond Bach: Music and Everyday Life in the Eighteenth Century*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

### September 29: Historiography of Music Biography II

Keefe, Simon P. "No Kind of Reading is so Generally Interesting as Biography': Establishing Narratives for Haydn and Mozart in the Second and Third Decades of the Nineteenth Century." *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 44/2 (2020): 67-79.

Wiley, Christopher. "Myth-Making and the Politics of Nationality in Narratives of J. S. Bach's 1717 Contest with Louis Marchand." *Journal of Musicological Research* 38/3-4 (2019): 193-215.

Cormac, Joanne. "Between Beethoven and Mendelssohn: Biographical Constructions of Berlioz in the London Press." *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 44/2 (2020): 80-99.

### October 6: Tracing Resonance

1. Madrid, Alejandro. *In Search of Julián Carrillo and Sonido 13*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

OR 2. Redmond, Shana L. *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. See also <https://musicjournalism.substack.com/p/shana-l-redmond-interview>.

### October 13: Collective Biography

1. Lewis, George. *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008.

OR 2. Mahon, Maureen. *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

### October 20: Feminist Biography I

1. Wald, Gayle. *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*. Beacon Press, 2007.

OR 2.

Zinsser, Judith P. "Feminist Biography: A Contradiction in Terms?" *The Eighteenth Century* 50, no. 1 (2009): 43-50.

Kimber, Marian Wilson. "The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography." *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 26/2 (2002): 113-29.

DeSimone, Alison. "Musical Virtue, Professional Fortune, and Private Trauma in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Feminist Biography of Elisabetta de Gambarini (1730-65)." *Journal of Musicological Research* 40-1 (2021): 5-38.

Heel, Kiri L. "Trauma and Recovery in Germaine Tailleferre's *Six Chansons Francaises*." *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 15 (2001): 38-69.

October 27: Feminist Biography II

1. Cusick, Suzanne. *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court: Music and the Circulation of Power*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009.
- OR 2. Von Glahn, Denise. *Libby Larsen: Composing an American Life*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

**November 1-7: Fall Study Break –No Class**

**November 8 – Submit individual project proposal to Prof. Ansari by email.**

November 10: Challenging Myths

1. Kelley, Robin. *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*. New York: Free Press, 2010.
- OR 2. Griffin, Farah Jasmine. *In Search of Billie Holiday: If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*. New York: Free Press, 2001. \*not available online – two hard copies on reserve\*

November 17: Ethnographic and Collaborative Biography

1. Guilbault, Jocelyne and Roy Hope. *Roy Hope: A Life on the Calypso and Soca Bandstand*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- OR 2. Feld, Steven, film director. *Hallelujah!* and *Accra Trane Station*. Kanopy: 2007.

November 24: New Approaches to Memoir

1. Questlove. *Music is History*. New York: Abrams Image, 2021. \*This book will be released October 12. If we cannot obtain a copy in time, a different book will be substituted.\*
- OR 2. Smith, Patti. *Just Kids*. New York: Ecco, 2010.

December 1 and 8: Project presentations

**Midnight, December 15 – individual project paper due. Submit by email as an MS Word document to Prof. Ansari.**