Queer Singing | Queer Spaces

Devon J Borowski
devonjborowski@uchicago.edu
Instructor

Course description
Queer practice and identity have long been expressed through and as song. According to Ovid, it was the great singer Orpheus who first introduced same-sex relationships to the people of Thrace; in early modern Europe, the men performing the role of Orpheus on the operatic stage were often eunuchs with non-normative bodies singing in a vocal range traditionally associated with the feminine. Beyond fabled musicians, though, carnal technologies of the voice have continually been implicated in historically and geographically situated paradigms of queerness.

Likewise, many of the spaces in which queer peoples have found community or refuge have, themselves, been associated with music or singing. What might it suggest that in the twentieth century, generations of queer communities formed around listening to and ventriloquizing the voices of Judy Garland, Maria Callas, and Whitney Houston? How might exclusively queer spaces, like the hijra communities in South Asia, effect the production of voice and performance of music for its inhabitants and outside observers? For which audiences are young trans* people on YouTube documenting their vocal progressions over the course of their transitions? And why have both European and Chinese operatic traditions abounded with cross-dressing for most of their respective histories?

In this course, we will investigate the broad relationship between practices of the voice and of the body and, in so doing, consider why so many of our cultural understandings of queerness are accompanied by singing. Along the way toward broaching these and other questions, we will confront the liberatory dimensions of the human voice through historical and contemporary performances that challenge notions of what a voice is or can do.

Expectations
No prior knowledge of music, practical or theoretical, is required to take or succeed in this course. Nevertheless, everyone will be expected to acquire a solid understanding of relevant terminology (musical or otherwise) used in class and apply it both in written assignments and in-class contributions. In so doing, students will begin develop a practice of focused and critical listening to accompany previously honed skills of critical reading and thinking.

When listening and viewing for this course, dispense with other activities. Don’t try to accomplish the next day’s reading at the same time. Find a quiet place where you won’t be disturbed and, with headphones if possible, listen to or view performances multiple times, perhaps while taking notes or pausing in the middle to ponder a particularly striking moment. Be sure to attend to the musical elements as much as the words in a given piece.

Just as challenging will be learning to translate what you hear into words. Writing (and speaking) about music is difficult, and even experienced listeners with keen ears often find it difficult to make that leap. We’ll work together to develop these skills through in-class discussion, and you’ll hone them through writing assignments.
Learning objectives
Over the course of the term, students will…

- cultivate a broader understanding of music’s social and cultural functions, especially as they relate to queer practice and identity across time and space.
- identify those ways in which the singing (and speaking) voice has been used historically to signify human difference.
- analyze and interpret arguments and assertions that deploy rhetoric of the “natural” or the “authentic” as they relate to the body and the voice.
- contextualize constructions of, and ideas about, the queer, the deviant, and the non-conforming across historical and cultural boundaries.
- apply newly expanded understandings of the material to instances and contexts not directly addressed in class.
- discover and explore new aesthetic models in both music and theater, especially with regard to live performance.
- develop and express their views in a clear and informed manner, based on musical and other kinds of evidence as well as their own personal taste.

Classroom Atmosphere
The classroom is a collaborative space, so be sure to arrive with questions, comments, revelations, connections, challenges, problems—in other words, your own viewpoints formed from your own listening and reading. Never feel as though you need to agree with me or with your classmates, and don’t expect others to necessarily share your opinion.

Everyone should try to participate with thoughtful, insightful, or enlightening contributions at least once per week. Sometimes I will offer discussion prompts, or ask someone to recount an important takeaway for them from readings or the previous class, but always feel free to raise your hand and offer your thoughts.

Similarly, expect to enter class as a generous reader, listener, and interlocuter. Feel free to critique a reading but also look for its merits. The same goes for the music that we’ll listen to, both at home and in class—try to meet it on its own terms and give it a chance.

Always be generous to your classmates. Assume the best of intentions and give people a chance to clarifying their meaning. Rather than interrupting or dismissing people, respond to them.

Writing Assignments
There will be four short assignments over the course of the quarter, inspired by the topic and readings (and due at the start) of the class for which it’s assigned. For these assignments, you will be asked to locate and write about a musical or sound object of your own choosing, and then share briefly in class. The purpose of these exercises is to provide you with more opportunities to explore topics from our course, but tailored to your own interests. Ideally, they will also serve to introduce the class to a wider array (and more niche selection) of material.
Each assignment is worth ten points, and graded based on creativity, content, quality of writing, completeness, and presentation in class. Papers will still be accepted up to 24 hours after the deadline has passed, but automatically lowered by two points.

**Paper Delivery Guidelines**
Papers must be turned in electronically to Canvas on the day of the class for which they are assigned. All papers must be submitted as Word documents (.doc or .docx), double-spaced with one-inch margins. Please proofread for spelling and grammar and use your best prose.

**Concert Review**
Students are required to attend at least one live musical performance of some kind over the course of the term. Relevant options will be provided as soon as publicly available. You will then write about your experience in the manner of a semi-personal review (circa 1000 words), incorporating, to the best of your ability, issues from the course.

Consider the goal of this assignment to provide a guide for an informed reader (perhaps a friend in the course) to make an educated decision about whether or not to attend this or a similar performance. Not only will they want to know what happens and its general quality, but also what you—a trusted and knowledgeable audience member—enjoyed about it (or did not).

**Final Project**
Students will submit a ten-page paper on a topic chosen in consultation with me, and then present their findings to the class in a short presentation during the final exam period in week eleven. In week six, you will submit a one-page topic proposal, but should plan to discuss possible avenues for research with me beforehand. (The recommended reading list below is a good place to start.) You are encouraged to be as creative as you like in the manner of your presentation, which should be rehearsed and not consist of simply reading your paper.

**Grade Breakdown**
In-Class Engagement & Attendance…….25%
Concert Review…………………….10%
Writing Assignments………………….40%
Final Project………………………….25%

**Electronics**
As this is a seminar style course and our day-to-day work will alternate between discussion and lecture, students are permitted to use laptops or tablets to take notes, reference readings, or offer relevant examples to the class. To this end, please be considerate and respectful about how you use devices. *Anyone using a phone at any point will be marked absent for the day.*

**Attendance & Punctuality**
Students are expected to be present and on time for all class meetings—participation requires presence! Equally, excessive and/or repeated tardiness as well as frequent and/or extended departures during class will result in a lowered attendance grade.
Students may miss one class—no questions asked—with no adverse effect to their grade. Beyond that, missed classes will deduct from their overall participation grade. Either way, whenever possible, please let me know in advance if you will miss class.

**Accommodations**
The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. Please speak with me privately about any disabilities that may require accommodations. As a first step, please consult with the Office of Student Disability Services ([http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/](http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/)) so that we can develop an appropriate plan (via an Accommodation Determination Letter) together. Student Disability Services is located at 5501 South Ellis Avenue.

**Writing Concerns and Issues**
Anyone with concerns about writing is strongly advised to make use of the University writing program by visiting [http://writing-program.uchicago.edu](http://writing-program.uchicago.edu)

**Statement on Academic Integrity**
Plagiarism is a serious offence and the University takes it seriously. In cases of plagiarism, students will automatically receive no credit for said assignment, will have their participation grade lowered, and the Dean of Students will be made aware of the situation. If you are not sure what constitutes plagiarism, visit: [http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/undergrads/wic5stuck](http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/undergrads/wic5stuck)
Course Overview

I. Introductions
   1. Singing out: course introduction and preliminary definitions
   2. Sounding queer: some conceptual and intellectual foundations  
      
   first writing assignment due

II. Queer Aesthetics of Voice
   1. Being “musical”: queer (originally gay & lesbian) musicology and its history
   2. “Camping” around: the camp aesthetic as a specifically musical phenomenon
      
   second writing assignment due

III. The Work of the Voice
   1. Masculine songs: the male role in singing
   2. Sacred erotics: the queer desire for the divine

IV. The Rest is Drag
   1. Dressing across the aisle: cross-dressing as historical/cross-cultural phenomenon
   2. Making (up) the drag queen: American drag, ball, and house cultures
      
   third writing assignment due

V. Cross-Dressing & Cross-Casting
   1. Now (main)streaming on Netflix: contemporary issues in drag
   2. Opera can be a drag, too: cross-dressing on the lyric stage

VI. Make Way for the Opera Queens
   1. Royally read: the queer erotics of the operatic voice
   2. La Callas: case study on Maria Callas as icon
      
   project proposal due

VII. Castration & the Vocal Fetish
   1. Singing then, or the desired men: early modern desire for the castrato
   2. Listening now, or the barbaric myth: present-day (re)conceptions of the castrato

VIII. The Queer Twentieth Century
   1. Love a cabaret: cabaret and modernism in fin de siècle and Weimar era Germany
   2. Racing the queer: black music in early- and mid-twentieth-century America
      
   fourth writing assignment due

IX. Queer Stars & Gay Icons
   1. Karen & k.d.: case studies on Karen Carpenter and k.d. lang
   2. Video queered the radio setar: out pop stars and queer music

X. Conclusions
   1. Post-mortem: looking (and listening) back on the course
   2. Reading day
      
   concert review due
Daily Schedule

I. Introductions

Day 1: Singing Out
Course introduction and preliminary definitions. Is there (can there be) a specifically queer sound, vocal or otherwise? What are the stakes in claiming a voice (or sound) as such?

Some introductory case studies to explore in class...
- FTM Singing Voice Documentation
- Ovid, excerpt from Book X (Orpheus and Eurydice) of Metamorphoses
- Plato, excerpt from Book III (on musical modes) of The Republic

Day 2: Sounding Queer
Some conceptual and intellectual foundations. What do we mean when we talk about queer spaces or queerness in general? What does singing have to do with being or acting queer?

Read for class...

Writing assignment one due...
Choose a favorite sound object (a song, a scene from a movie or filmed stage work, &c.) that relates to the themes of this course, as you understand them thus far, in some way. Explain what it means to you (aesthetically, personally, &c.) and what aspects of the course you believe it illustrates. Be prepared to share a clip in class and to say something (though not necessarily what you’ve written) about it.

500 words

II. Queer Aesthetics of Voice

Day 3: Being “Musical”
Queer (originally gay & lesbian) musicology and its history. How has singing historically been coded as queer? Does song (or music) actually have a special relationship to queerness?

Read for class...
- Peraino & Cusick, “The Same, but Different” from “Sexuality and Musicology, Then and Now,” colloquy in JAMS (2013): 825–831
Watch in class...
- Peter Pears performing with Benjamin Britten

Recommended reading...

Day 4: “Camping” Around
The camp aesthetic as a specifically musical phenomenon. What roles can music or the voice play in “camping”? What is unique about camp as a sonic (as opposed to visual) experience?

Read for class...

Watch for class...
- Broadway actress Deidre Goodwin shows how to “Keep It Campy”

Recommended reading...
- Lowder, series of articles on camp for Slate (2013)

Writing assignment two due...
Find an example of musical camp that you enjoy—anything from Judy Garland to John Waters, Mel Brooks to David Bowie, esoteric to classic—that demonstrates or challenges any of the definitions or explanations offered in the readings. Explain how and discuss any other significant aspects (whether to you or to the larger camp aesthetic) of your piece. Be prepared to share your example in class.

500 words

III. The Work of the Voice

Day 5: Masculine Songs
The male role in singing. How does trans*vocality complicate seemingly stable associations of voice and gender? How is the anxious performance of masculinity threatened by song?
Read for class...

Watch in class...
- Examples of trans* singers on YouTube
- Examples of boy’s choirs on YouTube
- Bad Bunny and Kevin Fret music videos

Recommended reading...

Day 6: Sacred Erotics
The queer desire for the divine. How might we hear sacred devotion through song as a queer means of expression? What is the role of space or place in contextualizing forms in desire?

Read for class...

Watch in class...
- Modern performances of Hildegard von Bingen
- Performances of contemporary Gospel choirs

Recommended reading...
- Peraino, *Giving Voice to Love: Song and Self-Expression from the Troubadours to Guillaume de Machaut* (2011)

IV. The Rest is Drag

Day 7: Dressing Across the Aisle
Cross-dressing as historical/cross-cultural phenomenon. How have forms of cross-dressing historically involved song? What are the limits to understanding drag beyond our culture?

Read for class...

Recommended reading...
• Roy, “Remapping the Voice through Transgender-Hijri Performance,” in Remapping Sound Studies (2019)

Day 8: Making (Up) the Drag Queen
American drag, ball, and house cultures. What role(s) does song typically play in drag culture and performance? To what extent can we consider lip-syncing as a kind of vocal drag?

Read for class...
• Newton, “Types of Acts” from Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (1972): 41–58

Watch in class...
• Scenes from Jennie Livingston’s Paris is Burning (1990)

Recommended reading...
• Terrell, “About Last Night” for Slate (2019)

Writing assignment three due...
Find an instance of drag (very broadly conceived) with music on film—whether a scene from a movie or television show, something off of social media, or footage from a live show or home movie. Offer some brief context and explain how it conforms to, or defies, any of the models that we’ve discussed in class or from the readings. Be prepared to share your example in class.

500 words

V. Cross-Dressing & Cross-Casting

Day 9: Now (Main)streaming on Netflix
Contemporary issues in drag. How have expanding audiences transformed drag performance, culture, and spaces? Has the role of music (or perceptions of drag-adjacent music) changed?

Read for class...

*Watch in class…*
• Clips from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and others

*Recommended reading…*
• Pasulka, “Read My Lips,” for *Slate* (2019)

*Day 10: Opera Can Be a Drag, Too*
Cross-dressing on the lyric stage. Why is gender-bending so integral to so many operatic forms and plots? How does cross-dressing complicate ideas of opera as a “highbrow” art?

*Read for class…*

*Watch for class…*
• [Stephanie Blythe as Blythely Oratonio in *Dito & Aeneas*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=)

*Recommended reading…*
• Lam, “Kunqu Cross-dressing as Artistic and/or Queer Performance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness* (2018)

**VI. Make Way for the Opera Queens**

*Day 11: Royally Read*
The queer erotics of the operatic voice. What is the queer appeal of the opera, in general, and the operatic voice, in particular? Where does the opera queen fit in modern queer culture?

*Read for class…*
• Morris, “Reading as an Opera Queen,” in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (1993): 184–200
Recommended reading…

- Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice” (1972)

Day 12: La Callas
Case study on Maria Callas as icon. Why did the voice of Callas prove so transformative for so many? Does her voice, now only available on recording, still retain the same power?

Read for class…


Watch in class…

- Scenes from Tom Wolf’s *Maria by Callas* (2018)

Project proposal due…

VII. Castration & the Vocal Fetish

Day 13: quf
Early modern desire for the castrato. To what extent was attraction to castrati and their voices queer? What can the role of the castrato reveal about historically situated forms of queerness?

Read for class…

- Fanny Burney, passage from *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782)
- William Beckford, letter to Lady Hamilton (1781)

Watch for class…

- Examples of castrato repertoire sung by female sopranos and male countertenors

Recommended reading…

Day 14: Listening Now, or the Barbaric Myth
Present-day (re)conceptions of the castrato. How might we interpret the figure of the castrato as queer now? What can modern depictions tell us about queer sound and space in our world?

Read for class...

Watch in class...
- Scenes from Gérard Corbiau’s *Farinelli* (1994)

Recommended reading...

VIII. The Queer Twentieth-Century

Day 15: Love a Cabaret
Cabaret and modernism in *fin de siècle* and Weimar era Germany. What was the role of song in the creation of the “homosexual” role? How can ideas of gender affect music production?

Read for class...
- Mungen, “‘Anders als die Anderen,’ or Queering the Song: Construction and Representation of Homosexuality in German Cabaret Song Recording before 1933,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch* (2006): 67–78

Watch in class...
- Scenes from *Cabaret* (1972)
- Scenes from *Victor/Victoria* (1982)
- Scenes from Schulz & Wischmann’s *The Life and Times of Max Lorenz* (2009)

Day 16: Racing the Queer
Black music in early- and mid-twentieth-century America. What is there to be gained from queering racialized music or “racing” queer music? How do these dynamics play out today?

Read for class...
Recommended reading...


Writing assignment four due...

Locate a historical or modern example of music traditionally associated with a specific identity group—a racialized genre, folk music linked with a particular ethnicity, a style usually thought to appeal to a certain gender, generational, or socioeconomic group, &c.—and offer an alternative queer reading (in other words, “queer” it). Be ready to share your example in class.  

500 words

IX. Queer Stars & Gay Icons

Day 17: Karen and k.d.
Case studies on Karen Carpenter and k.d. lang. Why did these two musicians, and others like them, become queer icons? What do their contemporary descendants sound (and act) like?

Read for class...


Watch for class...

- Scenes from Todd Haynes’s *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1989)

Recommended reading...

- Carey, “‘Flat Out Screaming Revolution’,” for *Slate* (2019)

Day 18: Video Queered the Radio Star
Out pop stars and queer music. What distinguishes a popular piece, genre, performer, or performance as queer? What are the stakes in having openly (and specifically) queer music?

Read for class...


Watch in class...

- Music videos by Troye Sivan, Madonna, and Janelle Monáe
Recommended reading...


X. Conclusions

Day 19: Post-mortem
Looking (and listening) back on the course. Are there any overarching themes that we can pick out? What are benefits and limits of a vocal or sonic approach to studying queerness?

Day 20: No Class

Concert review due...

***Final project presentations during exam time in week eleven***

***Papers due Friday of week eleven***

Course Syllabus


Anne Carson, “The Gender of Sound,” in Thamyris: Mythmaking from Past to Present (1994)

Adrianna Cavarero, For More than One Voice (2005)


Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety (1992)


Mitchel Morris, “Reading as an Opera Queen,” in *Musicology & Difference* (1993)

Anno Mungen, “Anders als die Anderen,” or Queering the Song Construction and Representation of Homosexuality in German Cabaret Song Recordings before 1933” in *Queering the Popular Pitch* (2006)

Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972)


Judith Peraino & Suzanne Cusick, “The Same, but Different” from “Sexuality and Musicology, Then and Now,” colloquy in *JAMS* (2013)

Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” (1964)


**Recommended Reading**


Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice” (1972)


Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005)


Judith Peraino, *Giving Voice to Love: Song and Self-expression From the Troubadours to Guillaume De Machaut* (2011)


