

Colloquium September 11, 2026
Thomas Christensen (University of Chicago)

Title: “How Global is Music Theory?”

Abstract:

In my talk, I want to explore some of the provocative questions raised by a forthcoming anthology that I am co-editing: “Thinking Music: Global Sources for the History of Music Theory” (CORPUS: The University of Chicago Online Press, 2027). Perhaps the first question one might ask about anything regarding a “global history of music theory” is this: how “global” is music theory? Is music theory a discipline and practice that is recognizable around the world? Or turning the question around, is global music theory something that those of us in the West who wear the moniker of a “music theorist” would recognize?

As I will hopefully persuade with selected examples from our anthology, a global music theory is indeed possible, but it needs to be flexible so it can accommodate cultures with widely differing notions of what it means to “theorize” music. The challenge is exacerbated when we try to reconstruct the historical musical thought of cultures long past without any literate documentation, and whose only evidence today might be found in archeological artefacts (perhaps organological, or perhaps iconographic). Is it possible to imagine let alone reconstruct from these cultural shards the “music theory” of a people who existed many centuries ago? In short, can there be music theory without texts?

Clues to how this might be done have actually emerged in more recent research into pedagogies of Western music that rely on oral instruction or in which musicians learn skills mimetically as embodied knowledge. Such knowledge, I would argue, is nonetheless theoretical, even if it is more implicit than explicit. All of this has opened up to us a more expansive notion what music theory might be, by seeing what it has been.

Bio: Thomas Christensen is the Avalon Foundation Chair of Music and the Humanities at the University of Chicago, where he has taught for the past 27 years. A scholar of the history of music theory, Christensen has attempted in his writings to situate the many intellectual frames, arguments and linguistic models used by music theorists in the early modern period deeply within cultural discourses. Hence, his 1993 monograph on Jean-Philippe Rameau attempts to analyze the Frenchman’s music theory as a complex response to both empirical as well as synthetic values of Enlightenment science. The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory that he edited in 2003 was the first comprehensive survey of Western music theory published in English. Other articles over the years have concerned the writings of such theorists as Vincenzo Galilei, Marin Mersenne, Seth Calvisius, Johann Mattheson, and Anton Reicha. Additional studies focus on music theory of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, thorough-bass theory and practice in the 18th century; problems in the historiography of music theory; and the history and social aesthetics of playing piano transcriptions in the 19th century. Christensen’s research has received support and recognition over the years from a variety of academic associations and funding agencies, including residencies from the American

Academy and Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin Germany, as well as fellowships from the Fulbright, ACLS, and Guggenheim Foundations. His most recent book concerns the concept of tonality as first elaborated by the Belgian music scholar, François-Joseph Fétis, and its reception in the 19th-century (*Stories of Tonality in the Age of François-Joseph Fétis*, University of Chicago Press, 2019). He is currently co-editing a major anthology of some 300 source readings and essays in the history of global music theory to be published by the University of Chicago Online Press in 2027.