

Colloquium March 17, 2026
Maeve Gillen, Dissertation Proposal Defense

Title: “Bodies and Politics, Sex and Gender: Hermeneutic Encounters with the Music of David Lang”

Abstract:

Bodies, politics, sex, and gender are, in some ways, things that music and music analysis cannot do without. Even when they remain hidden from the surface of discourse or musical practice, their substrates and those of the powers they facilitate leave traces. In this dissertation, I explore the ways these four topics interact within the work of contemporary minimalist David Lang. Through the incorporation of performative elements within Lang’s scores (e.g. performers moving around stage, lighting effects, etc.) as well as his choice of compositional subject matter, Lang’s work actively engages the issues of bodies, politics, gender, and sexuality, making it fertile ground for analysis of this kind.

Blending process-based analysis and hermeneutic methods, my analyses attempt not only to describe musical structures and put forward readings of their potential meanings, but also to examine the relationships that these structures and meanings engender between performers and between performer and composer. These relationships range from modes of inter-performer alienation to performers collectively enacting a political philosophy to the potential for sadomasochistic performance practice. Through incorporating perspectives from feminist and queer music scholarship and trans* studies, these readings come to address the issues of bodies, politics, sex, and gender in both the works themselves and their cultural context. Building on the work done in the analyses, this dissertation also asks what space there is for transness within the recent calls for a queer music theory. Through a rereading of core queer and feminist music scholarship since the 1990s, this project attempts to better understand how bodies, politics, sex, and gender have been understood within existing queer and feminist work. Shifting from the past to the present and future, I reflect on the work done in the dissertation as well as current music analytical work being done on trans subjects, ultimately asking what we can learn from these towards the development of transfeminist modes of music analysis.