

**Colloquium April 11, 2025**  
**Landon Morrison (Eastman School of Music)**

**Title:** “Listening to ‘Machine Listening’: Resistance and Reification in Contemporary Musical Practice”

**Abstract:**

We live in a world where machines “listen,” translating low-level audio data into high-level representations of all kinds, whether it be an analysis of songs in audio-fingerprinting apps like Shazam, voices in health-monitoring platforms like Sonde, or underwater ecosystems in Google’s “Calling in Our Corals” project. But how can we trust what machines hear? And what are the societal implications of delegating such a wide array of critical judgements to these nascent technologies?

The question of machine listening is at the center of developing discourse in media and cultural studies, where authors have debated the epistemological and ontological status of this kind of audition, as well as investigated its embeddedness in different social, economic, and geo-political networks. Building on this research, my presentation focuses on what machine listening means in the context of contemporary music practices, where it has been harnessed in commercial applications for automatic transcription, audio classification, and similarity searches, as well as in generative AI music-making applications like Google’s MusicFX. Drawing on Nina Sun Eidsheim’s reflexive “listening-to-listening” framework (2018), I highlight a general tendency towards the reification of sound and identity in machine listening tools, which too often rely on a problematic reduction of relational phenomena to audio-descriptive essences. I show how this tendency operates in voice analysis and re-synthesis tools, which purport to “disentangle” voices into independent parameters for age, gender, emotion, and other aspects of identity. I then read these claims against the grain of critical mis-uses and de-scriptings of such technologies found in recent music by experimental composers/sound artists Jessica Feldman, Alexander Schubert, and Jennifer Walshe. Through a series of short analytical vignettes, I show how this music offers different modes of resistance to the prevailing techno-optimism that characterizes commercial rhetoric around AI and machine listening, thus opening space to interrogate its ideological effects and rethink some of its underlying assumptions.