

Colloquium October 2, 2026
Chris White (University of Massachusetts – Amherst)

Title: “A Thousand Years of Musical AI”

Abstract:

Music, at its core, is ephemeral and embodied. It vanishes when performances end, surviving only in memory. At least, such was the case for most of human history. Over the last 1200 years, music has been inked into notation, grooved into vinyl, punched into code—and it has been so materialized that the creative process itself can now be embedded into generative AI. My talk traces how music shifted from embodied, in-the-moment practice to codified representation, paving the way for 21st-century automation. Blending music history, theory, and cognition with technical analysis, I chart how communities relocated music’s human components into non-human technologies and automation, and the consequences of those decisions. The result is a compounding process that makes music more durable and accessible, while increasingly separating musicians from their creations and altering how audiences value artistic creativity.

Bio: Christopher White is Professor of Music Theory at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, having previously taught at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Harvard University. Chris received his PhD from Yale University and has also attended Queens College–CUNY, and Oberlin College Conservatory of Music. Chris's first book *The Music in The Data* investigates how computer-aided research techniques can hone to how we think about music’s structure and expressive content. His second book, *The AI Music Problem* outlines ways that music poses difficulties for contemporary generative AI. He has published widely—from Music Theory Spectrum to The Daily Beast—on a wide range of topics, including music analysis, computational modeling, and artificial intelligence.