

Colloquium October 9, 2026
Anna Yu Wang (Princeton University)

Title: "The Political Work of Musical Classifications"

Abstract:

Among Anglo-American music theory's principal projects is the creation and application of rigorous classification schemes with which to describe music's numerous formal, spectral, and temporal phenomena. In this talk, I address the consequential yet still underexamined political implications of this descriptive vocabulary by analyzing two distinctions that are common currency in music-theoretical discourse: polyphony/heterophony and structure/ornament. I argue that these classifications, though appearing to be music structurally oriented, can reflect more about the limitations and propensities of the analyst's own sociopolitical positionality than about the acoustic features of the musical sounds being described. My aim in this paper is not to prescribe new definitions for these classifications, but to consider how their existing usage reveals the tacit contours of a disciplinary "information infrastructure" (Bowker and Star 1999) that has long been invested in and responsive to how the communities behind the sounds are themselves perceived and classed.

Bio: Anna Yu Wang is a music theorist and ethnographer concerned with what it means—and what it takes—to listen across lines of difference. Her research brings music analysis, field research, and examination of historical sources together to wrestle with the aesthetic and ideological questions confronting music studies in our globally connected yet politically divided present. Her book, *Musicality and the Myriad Things*, is in press with Oxford University Press. She is Assistant Professor of Music and Class of 1931 Bicentennial Preceptor in the Center for Human Values at Princeton University.