

Advancing Environmental Stewardship through Listening: Teaching Desert Music

In the face of ever more dramatic manifestations of climate change, listening to the voices of the land is a powerful tool for people from all walks of life and across the age spectrum to learn about its ecosystems and their role within them. Thus listening theories and practices play a key role in several of my courses offered at Arizona State University, specifically listening strategies that deepen our understanding of place, in this case the Sonoran Desert. This presentation will detail the content and assignments of the Desert Music course which engages different disciplines and includes students that pursue careers in music education, music therapy, performance, composition, musicology and the arts in general.

Taught every spring, this class explores environmental challenges in the American Southwest through the lens of sound. It examines the sound of population growth, social injustice, rising temperatures, drought, soil, water and air pollution, as well as wildlife habitat loss and investigates whether and how certain types of music address these problems in impactful ways. Students learn to listen to human settlement, urbanization and industrialization in the Sonoran Desert, its weather and climate, landscapes, bodies of water, soil, plants, mushrooms, and animals. Connected to these themes, a range of listening modes are studied through readings of texts by such authors as Michel Chion, Pauline Oliveros, Garth Paine, Dylan Robinson, and Salome Voegelin. Students engage in weekly solitary listening exercises to apply specific listening modes, choose different sonic niches for stationary and mobile listening and document their experiences in a listening diary. Sonic niche listening experiences are also regularly shared and discussed in class. Students commonly engage in group activities – often outdoors – to realize non-traditional music scores (from Oliveros’ Sonic Meditations, Deep Listening Anthologies, Cage, Lucier, and Teitelbaum etc.) that blur the division of performer and listener. Students carry out improvisatory exercises that facilitate environmental listening. Finally field recording techniques and listening through earphones are workshopped with the goal to combine these and other skills in creative placekeeping projects that engage local communities. These projects have included sonic treasure hunts for children, sonic postcard and sound mapping projects, soundscape compositions, audio-visual installations, interspecies improvisations, and soundwalks for seniors. Students who completed this class have learned to reflect about themselves as sounding and listening beings and their (sonic) impact on fragile desert environments. They have engaged in interdisciplinary topics and broadened their understanding of a world that desperately needs more environmental listeners and stewards to solve the pressing problems of a warming planet.