

MUS 507: Studies in Music History – Music, Modernism, and Nature
Instructor: Stephen Smith | Monday, 2pm – 4:40pm

Modernism is often thought of as being anything but natural. Modernist poets wander around cities and meditate on machines. Modernist painters make nature look unnatural, as impressionists smudge their flowers and cubists shatter their landscapes. But many modernists were inspired by the ways that nature seemed to be rapidly transforming around them. Modern science and technology, new philosophies of life, new ways of exploring the psyche, increasingly rapid means of travel and communication, new modes of contact among cultures and peoples, the relentless expansion of colonial powers, the dizzying acceleration of global markets—all these forces could seem to change nature into something drastically new and strange. Some thinkers and artists even came to see nature itself as a kind of immense modernist, incessant in its creativity and self-transformation. A great deal of modernism can be understood as a response to visions like these.

This seminar studies some of the ways that musical modernism responded to modern visions of nature. No previous experience studying modernism will be required. In addition to exploring connections between modernism and nature, the course can also serve as a broader introduction to modernism in music history, and in the arts more broadly. Most of our case studies will be drawn from the first half of the twentieth century, but we will examine earlier and later materials as well. Grades will be based on attendance, weekly participation in seminar discussions, regular reading responses, in-class presentations, and a final research paper.

This course is primarily intended for MM and DMA students, for whom it fulfills the Elective Group 1 requirement. MA students in the Composition track must take either MUS 503 or MUS 507 in the first year.

3 credits