

MUSI 1331 Music Appreciation

Executive Summary

This redesigned Music Appreciation course offers first-year students at Houston Christian University a fresh and formative encounter with Western art music. Rather than following the traditional chronological survey, the course is organized around the major forms that have defined the tradition – symphony, concerto, string quartet, opera, art song, tone poem, and others – allowing students to trace how each form evolved across the Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and modern eras.

The course invites students to listen deeply, think critically, and reflect personally through a distinctly Christian lens. It begins with the foundational properties of sound and the rich heritage of sacred music, moves from the tradition of the Baroque and Classical through the expressive power of Romantic individualism and nationalism, confronts the philosophical and musical crisis of tonality in the early twentieth century (connected to Europe’s broader turn from Christian faith), and concludes with the hopeful resurgence of beauty in the English school, spiritual minimalism, and the golden age of Hollywood film scores. Throughout, students discover music not as a neutral cultural artifact but as a God-given gift that reveals divine order and creativity, mirrors human longing and brokenness, and participates in the story of redemption.

The course equips students to become thoughtful stewards of musical beauty – able to hear both the groans of a fallen creation and the first notes of restoration – and prepares them to actively engage the arts with discernment, knowledge, and hope.

Course Description

An exploration of the rich heritage of the Art Music of Western Civilization from a distinctly Christian worldview. Beginning with the foundation of the sacred music of the Church, this course traces the development of major musical forms across the eras of Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and 20th century. Through listening to master works of music, reading curated articles, and writing personal reflections, students will discover how music reveals God’s beauty, order, and redemptive work in a broken world. No prior musical experience is required.

Course Outcomes

1. Outcome 1: Identify and describe the defining characteristics and historical development of major Western art music forms by comparing works across periods.
2. Outcome 2: Explain the theological and spiritual significance of sacred music traditions and their role in Christian worship.
3. Outcome 3: Integrate biblical principles with musical understanding, articulating how music reveals divine order, beauty, creativity, and redemption.
4. Outcome 4: Analyze the breakdown of tonality in relation to broader cultural and philosophical shifts, including Nietzsche’s ideas, and articulate a Christian critique.
5. Outcome 5: Evaluate 20th- and 21st-century examples of musical resurgence as evidence of beauty “from the ashes” and God’s redemptive work.

Course Distinctives

1. Listening-Centered Approach

Rather than relying on a single textbook, the course centers on active, guided listening to exemplary works from each major form and period. Students are introduced to the Grove Dictionary of Music (Oxford Music Online) as a primary scholarly resource and are encouraged to explore beyond assigned examples. Assignments build skills in attentive listening, musical analysis, and personal reflection.

2. Signature Assignment: “Beauty from Ashes” Personal Mixtape/Playlist

Throughout the eight weeks, students curate their own “mixtape” or playlist of classical (and classically-influenced) music based on further exploration of genres and forms experienced each week. Each track includes a reflective response or “liner notes”, culminating in a final synthesis essay. This project moves students from passive consumers to thoughtful stewards of musical beauty and invites them to trace the story of creation, crisis, and redemption in their own listening journey.

3. Integration of a Christian Understanding of Music

The course is rooted in the University’s core convictions and explores three key themes:

- a. Order and Beauty: Music reveals the ordered, harmonious nature of God’s creation. Even in complexity and tension, students learn to hear echoes of divine design.
- b. Crisis and Redemption: The breakdown of tonality is examined not only as a musical development but as a cultural symptom of Europe’s turn from Christian truth. The course does not end in despair; it highlights the faithful remnant and the resurgence of beauty in film scores and contemporary works as a picture of God making “beauty from ashes.”
- c. Imago Dei in Creativity: Students are invited to see composers and listeners as image-bearers who participate in God’s creative work. Music becomes both an act of worship and a means of cultural engagement, preparing students to steward beauty faithfully in whatever vocation they pursue.

Core Outcome Alignment

This course cultivates **Christian Wisdom** by exploring sacred music traditions and examining how Western art music reflects humanity’s desire to praise the Creator. Students connect musical beauty, crisis, and redemption to Scripture and historic Christian thought through weekly reflections and faith-integrated prompts.

Students develop **Aesthetic Literacy** through disciplined listening and analysis of major musical forms across periods. The “Beauty from Ashes” mixtape project and reaction videos train them to contemplate, articulate, and appreciate the beauty and order in God’s creation as expressed in music.

The course highlights **Interdependence** by presenting Western art music as a living tradition built across generations and communities. Listening journals and the signature mixtape project invite students to engage with this shared cultural conversation that connects past and present.

This course promotes **Flourishing** by equipping students to steward beauty, exercise creativity, and cultivate virtue. By wrestling with musical excellence and cultural brokenness – and discovering God’s power to bring beauty from ashes – students grow in wonder, hope, and cultural discernment.