

MUS-T561 – Tonal Systems in Early Music

Prof. Kyle Adams

T/Th 11:15-12:30, M344

Understanding the way early music “works” can be maddeningly frustrating. There are no major or minor keys, no functional harmony, and no triads or seventh chords. The music is built from a different set of scales from the ones we use today. Accidentals come and go, some written into the score and some not, and cadences often seem to have either too much or too little closure. Moreover, many of the terms we customarily employ to describe tonal phenomena—“harmony,” “cadence,” and “diatonic,” to name a few—either did not exist at all in the pre-tonal world, or worse, had completely different meanings. And yet, for all the difficulty one may encounter in modeling the structure of early music, its sounds are strikingly familiar. Put plainly, early music makes sense to our ears; it projects an overwhelming sense of logic and coherence even now. Addressing the foregoing problem—the disjunction between the perceived simplicity of early music and the difficulty of our attempts to understand it—will be the main project of this course.

This will be a repertoire-based course. Construing “early music” as broadly as possible (from chant to the late seventeenth century), we will use individual musical works—including, as much as possible, those suggested by students—as case studies. For each work, we will discuss the aspects of the music that lend a sense of tonal coherence (as well as those that do not), and supplement our observations with primary-source readings about contemporary theoretical concepts. In doing so, we will address, at some point, all of the major theoretical issues that occupied musicians before the eighteenth century: tuning and temperament, scales and modes (including the gamut), accidentals and *musica ficta*, rhetoric, and others. Ultimately, our goal will be to reshape our understanding of tonal coherence in early music, either by answering some of our fundamental questions, or by learning to ask different ones.



N.B. Fluency in reading early music notation will not be required for this course.