Overview: One of the easiest ways to describe the sonic processes elementary to music is with the term “gesture.” It seems to capture something very basic in how we as listeners and performers approach music, something implicit in our understanding of how it unfolds. Yet even though “gesture” encapsulates common ideas of contour and direction, it also discloses possibilities for musical concepts and categorizations that other musical terms cannot. Perhaps most importantly, it brings into the discussion eminently familiar—and yet still somewhat baffling and seemingly inscrutable—notions of bodily engagement, of human movement, and of intentional actions. Indeed, despite its utility in musical discourse, there is still very little that we understand about musical gestures.

Exactly what kinds of processes do we refer to when we talk about musical gestures? What are the mechanisms behind musical gestures? How are gestures instantiated in musical behavior? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what do they reveal about musicians’ and listeners’ musical understanding?

In this class we shall attempt to answer these and many other questions, and try to come to terms with the multitude of ways in which “gesture” is used as a musical concept. From a metaphorical descriptor that can be effective in music analysis, to a perceptual and cognitive process that emphasizes the body as the central element of our experiences of music, we shall examine the different ways in which a better understanding of “gesture” can help us come to grips with the very basis of our musical knowledge.

Requirements: Activities will include: (1) regular assigned readings taken from contemporary musicological, philosophical, and psychological scholarship on gestures and embodiment, (2) discussions—both in class and on an online forum—and (3) analyses of music. At the end of the semester, students shall present their final projects in front of their classmates at a “mini-conference,” in addition to submitting a longer paper based on this presentation.