No knowledge of German, music theory, or the ability to read music is required for this course.

If there’s one thing people think of when they think of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (aside from the Oktoberfest, the Disney-like castle Neuschwanstein, and the best chocolate cake anywhere), it’s the prominent role music has played in those foreign countries’ culture. It’s a cliché that the pomp and elegance of the German and Austrian aristocracy were accompanied by works of the greatest composers in history, but it’s also true that classical music continues to play a role in these countries quite unlike anything found elsewhere. It’s no coincidence that Germany alone still has over eighty opera houses that are, for the most part, state funded, and that their performances remain well attended and are often sold out well ahead of time. The symphony orchestra holds equal prominence in the culture of German-speaking Europe, and there the public enjoyment of chamber music—from string quartets to the art song, or Lied—is more widespread and active than anywhere else in the world.

The goal of this course will be to examine in what ways the most celebrated musical works of the past 200 years demonstrate the close connection between their time and the aesthetic material of which they are made. We will engage with a number of the most famous examples of German and Austrian classical music from the late 18th century to the 1930s, and will discuss them within their given cultural context. In addition to analyzing some of the major works of (in this order) Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Wagner, Richard Strauss, Weill, and others, we will also read some of these composers’ fiction and essays, as well as a 19th-century novella depicting the life of a failed musician, examine various (and often competing) approaches to critical interpretation (biographical, psychoanalytical, symbolic-epistemological, historicist, modernist vs. postmodernist, and feminist), discuss current debates concerning how one may legitimately make arguments about a given culture based on analysis of a given piece of music, and we will also examine the various assumptions at stake in the staging and performance practices of different times. Our investigations will include examinations of opera, music drama, symphony, art song, and jazz.

The only prerequisite is a willingness to participate actively in a dialog with the group and the instructor on the texts and the cultural issues against which they can be read (in other words, there will be no credit for attendance alone, only for participation). There will be three writing assignments: the first a summary of and response to a given aesthetic work; the second the summary of a given methodology or kind of interpretation; and in the final week of the course, preceding exam week, students will discuss, critically assess, and make suggestions concerning their colleagues’ drafts of an independent research project, the subject of which will have been agreed upon by the student and the instructor no later than three weeks beforehand. The final drafts of these papers will be due at the time scheduled for the final exam (in place of the exam). Grades will be computed as follows: Participation: 30%; Writing Assignments 1 & 2: 20% each; Final Paper: 30%.