“I can hear it any damned way I chose to!”
- Milton Babbitt

Umpire 1: “I call ‘em as I see ‘em!”
Umpire 2: “I call ‘em as they are!”
Umpire 3: “They ain’t nothin’ ‘til I call ’em!”

This seminar seeks to examine two related issues: first, very often when discussing music we tend to speak in terms of the attributes of a piece, rather than in terms of what we as listeners are using to construe what we hear. Clearly, this often is simply the result of a kind of shorthand: we say, for example, that a piece is a rondo, or a three-line, or is based on A-type hexachords, when what we may mean is that our learned habits and techniques of listening invite construing a piece in terms of Formenlehre or Schenkerian or Twelve-Tone and PC set-theoretic descriptions. But sometimes we forget that such observations are the results of our construal, and we begin to treat music as actually possessing some independent theoretical properties that must be unlocked, identified, discovered, decoded or wrested from it.

Second, we frequently encounter reactions to certain bodies of music that deem them in some way deficient: “recalcitrant,” “difficult,” “non-music,” are just some of the ways people have characterized music that to them has somehow failed. What constitutes failure, however, might well be not located in the music, but in those assumptions we hold about what it takes to listen to music(s).

What I propose to consider is how we may relocate our discussion of music from what we may say the music “is” or “does” to what we might say that we as listeners to - and thinkers about - music do, in other words, to those modes of construal we bring to the music we engage with.

I hope to draw on the interests of the members of the seminar in selecting both repertoire and theories to interrogate. My own contribution will use late 19th and early 20th century music as an arena for asking questions about modes of construal. This is a fraught era, one in which a variety of musicians responded to the chromatic saturation of diatonicism in a whole host of ways. I will consider the regular suspects (Schoenberg, Berg and Webern) but will address the music of Reger, Zemlinsky, Schreker, Schmidt, Furtwängler and Hindemith as well. As for theoretical readings, we will be looking at passages from Dora Hanninen and David Lewin, among others, with a particular eye on the choices, both conscious and unconscious, we make as listeners.