

Distinguished Lecturers in Music Theory Series

## **Dr. Sam Mukherji**



Assistant Professor of Music Theory  
University of Michigan

### **Internalism and the Cultural Politics of Music Theory**

Tuesday, January 26, 2021  
12:45pm ET  
Via Zoom

<https://msu.zoom.us/j/96627631874>  
Passcode: msutheory

Informal conversation with graduate  
students immediately to follow

Dr. Mukherji will also guest-teach on Thursday, April 1st:

#### **MUS 973 (graduate readings seminar on narrative and musical meaning)**

3:00–4:50pm ET

Contact Dr. Cara Stroud ([cstroud@msu.edu](mailto:cstroud@msu.edu)) if you wish to attend.

#### **Lecture Abstract:**

My focus in this talk is on internalism, a concept central to work in contemporary generative linguistics (as being undertaken by Noam Chomsky and others). This concept has its roots in the ideas of rationalist philosophies such as those proposed by Descartes, and especially the linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose writings are the basis for much of Chomsky's own work in linguistics. Part of my reason for focusing on this concept is to illustrate its significance for a number of current proposals about the human mind and its ability to create and comprehend language (and by extension music, as I will

argue too). However, a perhaps greater reason for my focus on internalism in this talk is to illustrate the rather profound commentary it has enabled, on human nature, and the implications this has for discussions of equality, freedom and human rights—as can be seen in the radical progressive politics of Chomsky himself. Why this is relevant to music theory is not only because of the connections it reveals between music and language—that topic of age-old interest within not only music scholarship—but also the connections it reveals between linguistic theory and certain kinds of music theory, especially those of Heinrich Schenker, and also those of indigenous, non-Western theorists, such as the Indian theorist Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande. Given some of the controversies surrounding the ideas of Schenker today, given the current cultural politics of the field, demonstrating the internalist basis for his ideas, with their progressive political implications—and furthermore their mutual connection to the ideas of under-represented, minority, music theorists—suggests a broader, more diverse, context for Schenkerian theory that has been hitherto ignored, by pro- and anti-Schenkerian music scholars alike. But more significantly, understanding the broader connections between internalism, music, and language, and between music and linguistic theory—i.e., understanding the ‘eternal golden braid’ between Humboldt, Schenker, and Bhatkhande—might help us progress towards a genuinely more global and inclusive music theory, but one that is not being given much attention within the present ideological frameworks of music scholarship.

## **Bio:**

Sam Mukherji's work lies at the interface of Western tonal theory, the theory and practice of popular and non-Western idioms, and the cognitive science of music. Within this framework, the main focus of his research has been on the grammatical aspects of Western tonality, and their connection to the tonal structures of rock music and the music of India. This emphasis makes his work similar to that of a linguist who explores relationships between the world's languages—and therefore his research has been influenced in particular by ideas from linguistic theory as well, especially contemporary generative linguistics. His major research projects currently are two co-edited book series from Routledge Press: the first is called *New Directions in World Music Analysis*, and which includes volumes on topics such as linguistic, computational, historical, and pedagogical approaches to world music analysis. His other book series, the *Routledge Raga Series*, includes companion guides to individual Indian ragas, the inaugural volume of which is a posthumous monograph by the late Harold Powers.