Music as Narrative in American College Football
(research director: Ron Pen)

American college football features an enormous amount of music woven into the game, with music following approximately two-thirds of all a game’s plays. Musical selections are controlled by a number of forces, including audio and video technicians, university marketing departments, financial sponsors, and wind bands. These blend together in a complex design that offers visual and audible stimulation to the audience during the game’s pauses. In these moments, the music chosen for performance frequently communicates meaning beyond entertainment value. Selections reinforce the game’s emotional drive, cue celebrations, direct specific audience actions, and prompt behaviors that can directly impact the game. Beyond this, music is performed to buttress the successes of the home team, and to downplay its failures. As this process develops over the course of the game, the specific musical works construct a narrative that comments on the game’s action, either enhancing or suppressing emotional reactions to the events on-field, and informing the experience of those in attendance. By preparing for and responding to in-game situations, music creates a coherent and emotional narrative from football’s unpredictable events.

This project will demonstrate the use of musical narrative in American college football via case studies of individual games from five of the most prominent college athletic conferences. These examples will consist both of interviews with stadiums’ musical coordinators, as well as documentation of the sequences of on-field action and the music that surrounds it. Finally, this project will utilize the lens of musical narrative as a new means of examining the cultural influences surrounding the sport, such as tradition, commercialism, racism, militarism, and nationalism.