

Class Composition

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, 1:00 - 1:50 p.m.
Ryan Center for the Musical Arts (RCMA) 1-160

Instructor: Craig Davis Pinson (craig.pinson@northwestern.edu)

Office: RCMA 4-156

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2:00 - 3:00 p.m., and more available by appointment (recommended)

Course description

An introduction to music composition for students of any background, centered around frameworks and practices drawn from the Western art music and popular music traditions, broadly construed. Students are not required to know notation or music theory; instead, verbal and graphical approaches will be used to examine some of the basic elements of music at the disposal of composers, i.e., pitch, rhythm, dynamics, timbre, repetition, variation and contrast, as well as their function in a variety of specific aesthetic and cultural contexts. The course will emphasize active listening as a way of developing greater conscious control over the student's own compositional decisions, as well as requiring students to put the ideas of the course to work within the means of their preferred musical genre(s). Assignments will be mostly oriented toward reading and writing about music from a variety of styles, traditions, and eras, as well as toward composing brief pieces or songs to be discussed in class.

Materials

Reading and assignment descriptions will be made available to you via Canvas, and other communications through your Northwestern email account.

Requirements and Grading

The components of your grade will be participation and attendance (20%); submission of reading responses (35%); the unit 1 quiz (5%), and the final composition project (40% - this grade is subdivided into various stages, see that section of the syllabus). There is also the possibility of 5% extra credit via a choice between two extra projects, outlined below.

Participation (20%)

Your contributions will be crucial to the success of this class. Reading and other assignments should be completed before class time on a given deadline, as listed on the Course Schedule below; you are expected to arrive (on time!) prepared to participate actively in discussion of the material. Be aware that “discussion” involves not only speaking but also listening to and engaging with your fellow students. Do your best to put this principle into practice.

Consistent attendance is obligatory for successful performance in the course, and our attendance policy follows that of the School of Music’s Undergraduate Handbook:

Students are expected to attend all sessions of courses...for which they are registered....
When one-time conflicts arise...the student’s attendance obligation for the scheduled course...still stands.... For exceptional circumstances, contact the student affairs office for assistance.

Excessive absence is potential grounds for failure in the course. Even when absences are excused due to personal emergency, religious observance, or professional conflict (auditions, etc.), you remain responsible for covering the assigned course material, and we will need to discuss ways of demonstrating that you have done so.

Reading Responses (35%)

A major portion of your grade will be drawn from a course-long series of reading responses. Each reading assignment will be accompanied by a response entry prompt on a Canvas assignment page. These responses must be at least one, and no more than two paragraphs. You must submit your response to each prompt by 12:00 p.m. on the day they are due (Note: this is a full hour before our class meeting time) - otherwise, you will not receive credit. This is so I have time to read your responses and be able to meaningfully address them.

Unit 1 Quiz (5%) - On Friday, October 6

There will be a short quiz at the end of our first unit, in order to make sure the class as a whole is on the same page with the fundamental concepts we will be working with moving forward into unit 2. The quiz format will be split between multiple choice questions and short answer questions. More information on the quiz will be made available to you via Canvas.

Final Composition Project (40% - broken up as follows):

More detailed information about all of these will be made available on Canvas.

- **Submission of choice of music to react to (5%) - due Friday, October 13**

You must provide three ranked choices of pieces/songs which exemplify one of the six compositional strategies of this course, which you will create a response composition to. You must make clear, in a couple of sentences, which strategy each track can exemplify and provide a link to recordings/scores where applicable. I will review these and will give approval on a the piece/song in order for you to begin your analysis of one of them.

- **Analysis of chosen music (10%) - due Friday, October 20**

A more specific elaboration of how the chosen piece/song works within the conceptual frameworks in class, and the description of some of its musical qualities.

- **Plan for response composition (5%) - due Friday, October 27**

A description of how you will create a piece of music/song modelled after the previously analyzed piece/song and its corresponding compositional strategy.

- **Full Rough Draft Submission (10%) - due Friday, November 10**

A completed, working draft of the piece must be submitted. This is especially important for those of you taking advantage of the readings with visiting musicians at the end - allowing me to give feedback on your scores can potentially streamline the reading process and get you a much better representation of you ideas.

- **Final Draft Submission (10%) - due Friday, November 24 before midnight**

The most polished version of your score/recording/track (as applicable) should be in and ready to be presented on, either through playback on the speakers, self-performed, or via the readings with visiting musicians.

Extra Credit Project (5%) - Choice between Extra Credit Composition Challenge and Extra Credit Short Essay (*Each student can only do one!*) - **Both due Wednesday, October 11 at 12:00 pm**

Extra Credit Composition Challenge

This is an opportunity for those students that already have experience making music before this class to get more hands on work done early on in the quarter and receive feedback. You will be tasked to complete a short composition/song based on a prompt I will make available via canvas.

- OR -

Extra Credit Short Essay

You will be given a prompt to write a 2-3 page essay on topics relating to compositional process, aesthetics, or musical analysis. More details will be made available via Canvas.

Other Information

Academic integrity: Please be aware of University-wide policies regarding dishonesty in academic work, as well as those specific to the School of Music. Information can be found at www.northwestern.edu/provost/students/integrity/#guide. If you are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism, or of the circumstances under which you are obligated to cite a source in your writing, please consult the documents found through this site.

Communication: I will often communicate important information to the class – potentially including changes or clarifications to the reading and listening assignments – via email. Please check your mail regularly for updates.

Students with disabilities enrolled in this course and who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the second week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the University’s Office of Services for Students with Disabilities office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

Electronic device policy: Laptops and other electronics may be used only for legitimate course-related purposes during our meetings. Devices being used for other purposes must be turned off in class. Abuse of this policy may be grounds for banning electronic devices entirely from the classroom. For exceptional circumstances, speak to me in advance.

COURSE SCHEDULE

-----UNIT 1: INTRODUCTORY MATERIALS-----

Week 1

What does it mean to compose, and to do so “effectively”?

Wednesday, September 20:

Welcome, what this course is and what it’s not

Friday, September 22:

Diverging issues of aesthetics, media, and the function of music

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Musical Background Questionnaire

To deconstruct in class:

Interview with composer Frank Tichelli on the composer’s “voice” and the “rules” of music (YouTube video)

Week 2

The “elements” of sound and music

Monday, September 25 (Last day to add classes):

The importance and dangers of genre specificity

Reading response #1 due:

Compare and contrast the notions of genre presented by the two reading fragments.

Required reading:

Two fragments of Chapter one: Introduction in Holt, Fabian. *Genre in Popular Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. (pp. 1-9, and pp.12-24) (Full book available online via library).

Fragment of Kallberg, Jeffrey. "The Rhetoric of Genre: Chopin's Nocturne in G Minor." *19th-Century Music* 11, no. 3 (1988): 238-61. (pp. 1-10).

Recommended materials:

Stockfelt, Ola. 1997. "Adequate Modes of Listening." *Keeping Score*. 129-146.

John Cage on “the sounds themselves” (YouTube video)

Wednesday, September 27:

The elements of sound and of traditional Western music theory

Friday, September 29

“Observing, witnessing and emulating” - learning how to compose

Reading response #2 due:

How does Fikentscher go about becoming a "student" of contemporary dance music, and why? If you were to take an analogous approach to becoming a music-maker in one of your preferred genres, how might you go about it?

Required reading:

Fikentscher, Kai. 2002. "The Disc Jockey As Composer, or, How I Became a Composing DJ". *Current Musicology*. no. 67/68: 93-98.

Recommended reading (Not required):

Introductory chapter in Butler, Mark J. *Playing with Something That Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance*. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Week 3

The six compositional “strategies” for this course: Overview

Monday, October 2

Reading response #3 due:

Briefly compare and contrast Stravinsky's ideas about creative limitations with that of visual artist Phil Hansen. Provide an example of how you might imagine applying these principles to your own work, and try to get as specific as possible.

Required reading/viewing material:

Pp. 63-65 of Stravinsky, Igor. *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Phil Hansen: “Embrace the Shake” (TED talk)

Wednesday, October 4

Friday, October 6

QUIZ: Course themes and terms

-----UNIT 2: COMPOSITIONAL STRATEGIES AND CASE STUDIES-----

Week 4

I. Dealing with time - notions of form and narrative

Monday, October 9

Wednesday, October 11

EXTRA CREDIT PROJECT DUE (Both composition and essay options)

Reading response #4 due:

What is the relationship Guess is proposing between the musical structure and the "literary" structure in Kendrick Lamar's album, Good Kid, M.A.A.D City? Do you believe that his argument is reflected accurately in the musical/textual examples he chose?

Required reading:

Wynton Guess's essay on Kendrick Lamar's *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City* (I strongly encourage you to listen to the examples from the album along with his analysis)

Friday, October 13

ASSIGNMENT DUE: List of Piece/Song Choices to Respond To

Week 5

II. Working with outside restrictions or self-imposed limitations

Monday, October 16

Wednesday, October 18:

Guest composer - Luis Fernando Amaya

Reading response #5 due:

Briefly, what are the main ideas about the function of music in society that Namay is proposing in his article, and, how does he claim that Luis Fernando Amaya's artistic process reflects it? How do these claims resonate with you? Please provide an example of a way you've seen these kinds of ideas employed in other music or any artform. If this proves impossible, please imagine, as a thought experiment, how you yourself might implement them in your work if you desired to do so.

Required reading:

Reflections on Luis Fernando Amaya's "Objeto/Espacio no.2: Variaciones y Bagatelas" by Eli Namay.

Required Listening:

Objeto/Espacio no. 2 - for prepared/flawed string instrument, by Luis Fernando Amaya

Recommended (Not required) Reading:

Gary Tomlinson - *Music in Renaissance Magic*, Chapter One: "Approaching Others" (Especially the subsection "Anthropology and Its Discontents")

Friday, October 20

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Analysis of Chosen Piece/Song

Week 6

III. Conventions - exploited, challenged, or strategically abandoned

Monday, October 23:

"Affordances" of musical media - the saxophone quartet, and art song

Wednesday, October 25

(Class cancelled that day due to illness)

Friday, October 27 (Last day to drop classes):

The Beatles and Beethoven - Expressive dialogues with norms and conventions

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Plan for Model/Response Composition

Week 7

IV. Genre mixing - self-aware expressive and rhetorical techniques

Monday, October 30:

Guest composer - Alex Temple

Reading response #6 due:

When does "influence" become "exploitation"? This question lies at the heart of many modern debates about aesthetics and morality. Briefly summarize Alex Temple's position and arguments in both "What Counts as Borrowed Material" and "The Appropriation Problem" with regards to this question. Next, provide your own opinion on where you think that line can be drawn, or if you agree that there is a distinction.

Required reading:

"What Counts as Borrowed Material?", "How to Be Culturally Relevant" and "The Appropriation Problem" by Alex Temple

Wednesday, November 1

Friday, November 3

Week 8

V. Improvisation as a form of composition, or as a compositional tool

Monday, November 6:

Guest artists - Haiga Duo (viola/spoken word + accordion)

(No reading response due this week - work on composing!)

Wednesday, November 8:

Micro-survey of improvisation in music across genres

Friday, November 10:

Guest composer - Alex Mincek on improvisation in jazz and contemporary classical music

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Full First Draft of Final Project

Week 9

VI. Working with text and visual media - how does one medium influence the other?

Monday, November 13:

Guest presenter - Nicholas Cline on sound and image

(No reading response due this week - work on composing!)

Wednesday, November 15:

Micro-survey - Text and music in the Western classical tradition

Friday, November 17

Micro-survey, continued - Text and music in modernist and experimental musics

Week 10

Monday, November 20:

Guest presenter - Stephen Hudson on heavy metal

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Final Draft of Final Project

Wednesday, November 22

Reading response #7 due:

What does McMillin mean by "integration theory," and why does he claim that viewing the musical through that lens is a mistake? What does he propose instead? Briefly compare/contrast this approach to the relationship between musical and non-musical (visual elements and actions, text, etc.) components to at least one example we've touched upon in class before.

Required reading:

Pages 15-21 (first two sections of the first chapter) in McMillin, Scott. *The Musical as Drama : A Study of the Principles and Conventions behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006. (Online access through NU library)

Friday, November 24

No class, Thanksgiving Break

Week 11

Final student composition presentations and discussion

Monday, November 27

Wednesday, November 29: ~Nois Saxophone Quartet student readings

Meet at the Ryan Opera Theater

Friday, December 1

FINALS WEEK

We will not have a final exam in this course