

MUS 209, Creative Practices Seminar, Winter, 2014
Michael Dessen, University of California, Irvine
Syllabus

Course meets: Wednesdays, 2:00-4:50pm, MM 218

Course webpage: <http://music.arts.uci.edu/mdessen>

My office: 3023 Contemporary Arts Center (CAC)

Office hours: By **appointment**

Email: mdessen@uci.edu

Coursework

1. A substantial composition project you design: I consider this half of your workload for the course. You'll propose the this piece in the writing assignment explained in the **first week handout**. You should work on this piece consistently throughout the quarter and must show work-in-progress along the way, as indicated on the schedule below. Note that you are responsible for finding the performers and running rehearsals outside of class time, though if you need help finding players I can help with that if you inform me early in the quarter.

2. Two or three short composition exercises that I will design, possibly leading to a group project: I'll assign three short composition exercises to generate materials that we'll workshop in class as improvisers. We may combine some of them to create a collaboratively-composed piece to include on the concert. You may also be asked to make minor revisions based on our in-class discussion/rehearsal, but overall these exercises should not take up too much time outside of class because they are fragments/sections, not full pieces.

3. Two presentations analyzing works by other artists, one chosen by you and one by me: For these presentations you are expected to discuss both technical details of a piece's construction and the broader ideas and contexts that inform them. Details are also in **the first week handout**. You'll propose one of the pieces in the first week's writing assignment, and I'll assign you another early in the quarter.

4. Class discussions and participation in final concert. Giving constructive feedback to your peers is an important part of this course, as is your participation in the final concert as a performer and producer (helping run tech and record it, doing publicity, and creating program notes).

Deadlines and attendance

Failure to complete assignments on time will make it very difficult for you to pass this course. Participation in discussions is a crucial part of graduate seminars, so absences or lateness will affect your grade.

Grading

Your grade will be assigned at the end of the quarter, and will reflect all the required work for the course, as described above. In addition, you must email me by noon Friday of exam week with a brief self-evaluation that explains the grade you think you deserve and why, along with a self-critique of your composition project.

Academic integrity

Collaboration is a crucial part of the course and you are strongly encouraged to provide one another with feedback, suggestions and support. However, the composition project, exercises and individual presentation should be your own work, and you must cite all sources, in accordance with **UCI Academic Honesty** policies.

Special needs

If you have a disability that affects your ability to complete the coursework on time, you must have it documented through the [Disabilities Services Office](#) and contact me through them at the beginning of the quarter to make any necessary arrangements in advance.

Office hours and getting help

If you have any trouble with the course, it is important to seek help early. Please [email me](#) some times you are free, and I will be happy to meet.

Schedule

Wed. 1/8, week 1

Course overview and discussion

Wed. 1/15, , week 2

Each student meets individually with instructor to discuss their composition project, or possibly a presentation by instructor on another topic instead (depends on discussion in week 1)

Wed. 1/22, , week 3

Short exercise #1 due: Rehearsal/discussion in class

Wed. 1/29, , week 4

Guest visit from composer Allison Johnson

Wed 2/5, , week 5

Presentation #1 (the piece you chose). Also: Brief updates on composition progress, with feedback from group

Wed 2/12, , week 6

Short exercise #2 due: Rehearsal/discussion in class

Wed 2/19, , week 7

Individual meetings with instructor instead of class meeting this week

Wed 2/26, , week 8

Presentation #2 (the piece you were assigned). Class will be cut short today to give you some extra time to attend the workshop with the Isbin/Walton duo on Friday, 12pm-2pm.

Wed 3/5, , week 9

Rehearsal of group piece based on exercises and/or other topic TBD

Wed 3/12, , week 10

Run through of all pieces: All compositions must be complete by this date. Each composer must also email their program notes to the class mailing list for all to read by midnight on Friday of this week.

Exam week

Final class concert, time/day TBA

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First week writing assignment
Due in Dropbox by noon on Wed, Jan 15

1. In a few paragraphs, discuss your current interests and goals as a musician. What kind of music do you want to create, and why?
2. Discuss weak areas you need to work on to accomplish those goals. Be honest.
3. Propose a short composition project that 1) addresses BOTH of the points above, and 2) can be created and performed during this 10-week quarter. Design a piece that is realistic in this timeframe but also gives you an opportunity to work in depth on something new. It is your responsibility to arrange for the performers, but if you need help with that, let me know immediately. Please be sure to answer these questions about your proposed piece:

What is the instrumentation?

Who are the performers who have agreed to do it, and what instruments if any do you still need to find performers for? How many rehearsals do you expect it will require?

How long do you expect the piece to be?

Discuss the idea(s) behind the piece and how it relates to the interests/goals you explained in question #1.

What kind of compositional approach or method will you use?

In what kind of context or venue would you want to present this music, if you weren't in a university?

4. Propose a piece of music by an established musician that you would like to use for your individual analysis presentation. Explain very briefly what interests you about that person's work and about the piece in particular. (See the presentation guidelines below.)

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Guidelines for analysis presentations

For this course, you'll do two presentations, one on a piece you choose and present yourself, and another on a piece I assign you. This is a chance for you to work on your own methods for studying other people's music, which (in my view) is an important part of compositional practice. The range of presentations in class will also expose us to a variety of works and ideas in contemporary music, and can help us learn about one another's different aesthetic worlds. A final aspect of these assignments is simply for you to practice giving effective oral presentations.

Presentations will be roughly 30 minutes, no more than 40 minutes, which includes any time for playing examples and questions/discussion. Try to choose a compelling angle and discuss both broader ideas as well as some examples of the technical details that support them. The format of the presentation is up to you, but I strongly recommend some kind of outline, handout, or powerpoint to structure your thoughts and get the most out of the time you have. Here are questions that I expect you to address:

Provide a VERY brief background on the composer. What contexts do they work in and how does this particular piece fit into their overall output? (Boil this down to 2-3 minutes at most; do not spend much time outlining factual information that we can all look up online ourselves.)

What do you think motivated the piece? Is it based on a central idea of some kind, and/or a particular compositional process? What do you think the composer was trying to do?

How is the piece constructed? What analytical tools would be useful to explain how you think it "works" and the craft of how it was put together? What details are you drawn to and why are they important?

Do not think only in terms of traditional tools you used in undergraduate music theory classes. If those methods help, feel free to use them, but do not simply follow analysis recipes you were taught. In some cases you might discover published work that provides helpful analytical insights into the piece or the broader musical genre, by scholars or even the composer her/himself. Feel free to draw on any published work you find, but as always, cite all sources carefully.

If you are struggling with this, please talk to me early in the process and I'll try to help.