

MUS 212, Graduate Composition Seminar, Winter 2011
Michael Dessen, University of California, Irvine
Syllabus and Schedule

Course meets: Tuesdays, 2-4:50pm, MM 316

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

My office: 105 Music and Media

Office hours: Tuesdays 11:30am-1:30pm, and by **appointment**

Email: mdessen@uci.edu

Coursework

1. A composition project you design: I consider this half of your workload for the course. You'll propose the this piece in the first week's writing assignment. We'll agree on a plan during week two, and I expect you to start working on it then. Details are in a **handout**. Please note that you are required to work on this piece gradually during the quarter and show work-in-progress along the way, as indicated on the schedule below.

2. 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. Depending on how this goes and whether there is enough time, we may eventually combine the different parts into a larger group piece.

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 give them meaning. Details are in a **handout** (on page 2). You'll propose one of the pieces in the first week's writing assignment. I'll also assign you another piece that you'll present in collaboration with one or two other students.

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 also severely 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, which includes:

1. The composition project you designed
2. The short exercises I assigned
3. The analysis presentations
4. The week 1 writing assignment and finals week self-critique

The first item is worth roughly half your grade and the rest counts for the other half. You must email me by 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. Please note that simply following all instructions and completing all work at a satisfactory level merits a "C," while "B" means "good" and an "A" means excellent.

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

(At the beginning of the quarter, we'll assign each student A, B, C etc. for deadline purposes.)

Tuesday Jan. 4

Course introduction and group listening/discussion

Tuesday Jan. 11

1st half of class: Group meeting to share ideas from the writing assignment
2nd half of class: Individual meetings with instructor, 15 min. each

Tuesday Jan. 18

Short exercise #1 due: Workshop in class

Tuesday Jan. 25

Students A and B give presentation #1
All: Composition project work in progress

Tuesday Feb. 2

Students C, D, E give presentation #1
Short exercise #2 due (share score materials; we'll work on it next week)

Tuesday Feb. 9

Workshop short exercise #2
All: Composition project work in progress

Tuesday Feb. 16

Presentation #2 (both groups)

Tuesday Feb. 22

Short exercise #3 due: Workshop in class
All: Composition project work in progress

Tuesday Mar. 1

Students A, B, and C: Composition projects due (in-class performance/recording and present).
Final group critique.

Tuesday Mar. 8

Students D and E: Composition projects due (in-class performance/recording and present). Final
group critique and course wrap-up.

MUS 212, Winter 2011, Dessen
First week writing assignment
Due in Dropbox by noon on Monday, Jan 10

This assignment is due by noon on Monday (via Dropbox). I'll finalize a plan with each of you during the 2nd week of the quarter so you can get started composing by the end of that week.

1. Discuss your current interests and goals as a musician. One page or so is fine, but provide both breadth and detail about the music that you want to create, and why.
2. Discuss weak areas you need to work on to accomplish those goals.
3. Propose a short composition project that addresses both of these points above and can be created and performed by the deadlines listed on the course schedule. Do your best to design a piece that can be accomplished in the given time frame but also gives you room to work in depth on something new, not just recycle earlier work. It needs to be not only composed but also performed by the deadline, and it is your responsibility to arrange for any performers necessary to perform the piece. I will do my best to help you find performers, but we need to finalize that during this first two weeks of classes. I do not recommend medium or large ensemble pieces due to the time limitations and difficulties arranging rehearsals with many people. Please provide these details:

What is the instrumentation?

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 what interests you about that person's work and about the piece in particular. (See also the separate handout on presentation guidelines.)

MUS 212, Winter 2011, Dessen
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 that you'll present in collaboration with other students. This is a chance for you to work on your own methods for studying other people's music, which I think 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 from one another's different aesthetic worlds. A final aspect of these assignments is simply for you to practice giving effective presentations on music.

For your individual presentation, you'll have 30 minutes, of which you can use up to 10 minutes to play a recording of the piece. For the collaborative presentation, you'll have 45 minutes. If you really dig into the pieces as I hope, you'll end up with way more material than you can fit into those times. Try to choose a compelling angle and discuss both broader ideas as well as some examples of technical details. 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 would like 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 anyone can look up online.)

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? You do not necessarily need to use standard theory-class techniques, but you should show some specific details, as well as talk about the larger ideas that give them meaning.

Depending on what type of music you are looking at, you may find other questions more specific to your piece, but these are the general contours to follow. If you are struggling with this, please talk to me early in the process.