

MUS 231, Open Improvisation Seminar, Fall 2010
Michael Dessen, University of California, Irvine
Syllabus

Course meets: Tuesdays, 2-4:50pm, MoCap Studio (MM 218)

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

Course introduction

Improvisation is present in most of the world's musical traditions. In this light, the predominant methods of European classical music during the past century are, to borrow George Lewis' phrase, "an exception to the planetary rule."

Taking this broad sense of the term, a course on musical improvisation might introduce techniques from any number of musical traditions, such as Carnatic music of South India, keyboard music of 18th century Western Europe, Ewe music of West Africa, or endless other examples. This course, however, will focus on improvisatory practices and music subcultures that have emerged during the past half century, and can be more difficult to define or locate. There is no singular canon or simple map for this landscape, and this course does not attempt to provide a historical survey. But we will study many recent currents of exploratory music in which improvisation is not simply present, but a core practice and idea.

In addition to listening, reading and writing assignments, the course also has a performance component. In collaborative work both in and outside of class, you will practice applying your existing performance skills to the act of collective, realtime composition, and you will confront the challenges of improvising with people whose musical background may be very different from your own. At the same time, through individual practice assignments, you will be expected to work on expanding your own instrumental vocabulary in new directions. Although ten weeks is not long enough to achieve any cataclysmic advances in your musicianship, focused practice in such a context can be an important seed, opening new directions for further study.

Since there are other courses in our graduate program which emphasize creating scores, our focus in this class will be primarily on forms of improvisation in which there is no pre-composed score or framework. For the class to be successful, it is critical that everyone help create a supportive environment for collective work. This does not mean avoiding critique or conflict, which are often present in collaborations, but it does mean treating everyone with respect, and helping others realize their potential to make a valuable contribution.

Course requirements

Class attendance and participation: Informed participation in all class discussions and performance activities is a course requirement. Early in the quarter, we will discuss the nature and purpose of critique in a course like this, since you are required to both receive and provide it.

Weekly assignments: Weekly assignments will be handed out in class and also sent to the listserv. They will usually involve two parts: 1) a performance practice that you will work on throughout the week, either alone or in collaboration with another student, and 2) a reading and/or listening assignment, often with questions to guide a written or in-class response. Sometimes the two parts will be related, and sometimes they won't. My expectation is that you will work for a total of 6-8 hours per week outside of class on the weekly assignment, though the final few weeks of the quarter will be lighter to allow you time for the research paper.

Concert response assignment: Although Southern California is home to many world-class improvisers, recent budget cuts leave me no funding to bring in guest artists to share their work with you this quarter. Instead, I am requiring you to go out and hear them perform in their local habitat. You will be required to attend two off-campus concerts from a list I will provide in the first class, and to write a brief response, due via Dropbox by 2 pm on Tuesday, Nov. 30.

Research paper: For this assignment, you may choose any topic that is relevant to the course but you must clear it with me ahead of time. By 2 pm on Tuesday, November 2, you must turn in via Dropbox a proposal that includes a paragraph or two describing your research question and topic, and a preliminary bibliography and discography. If you need suggestions for developing your proposal, please speak to me early in the quarter. By 2 pm on Tuesday, December 7, you must turn in via Dropbox the final paper, which should be roughly 10 pages, double-spaced.

Class concert: Together we will develop a program for a final class performance that includes contributions from everyone in duo, trio and possibly some larger formats. We will schedule the concert during the first week of classes to make sure everyone can make the date, since participation is required.

Lateness policy

I do not accept late assignments, except in cases of genuinely severe emergencies. It is especially critical that you turn in the research proposal and paper on time, since failure to do so will make it very difficult for you to pass the course.

Grading

Your grade will be assigned at the end of the quarter, and will reflect all the required work for the course, which includes three categories of roughly equal weight:

1. Informed participation in all in-class discussions and activities, and in the final class concert
2. Weekly assignments and concert response assignment
3. Research paper, including the proposal. Both must be turned in on time.

In addition, to receive a grade for the course you must email me (mdessen@uci.edu) by noon on Wednesday, December 8 with a brief self-evaluation that explains the grade you think you deserve and why.

Academic integrity

Collaboration is a crucial part of the course. You are strongly encouraged to provide one another with feedback, suggestions and support. However, the weekly written responses and the research paper must conform to standard academic policies, meaning that you must fully cite sources for any ideas that are not your own. (If you incorporate ideas from another person that are not published, you can cite them under the reference type "conversation with the author," "email to the author," "interview with the author," etc.) Plagiarism of any kind is a violation of UCI Academic Honesty policies and will be punished severely.

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.