

MUS 276 / MUS 176 Fall 2018 Dessen

[Jump to Today](#)

 [Edit](#)

Syllabus for MUS 276 and MUS 176 Contemporary Ensemble

Course meets: Thursdays 1:30pm-3:20pm, MM 220

Instructor: Michael Dessen, [mdessen@uci.edu \(mailto:mdessen@uci.edu\)](mailto:mdessen@uci.edu)

Office hour: Tuesdays at 3:30pm in CAC 3023, and by appointment

Course description and method

For this course, we will collectively develop a concert-length musical work customized for this ensemble's instrumentation and personnel, and perform it at the end of the quarter.

All students in the course will be required to participate in this work as performers, which will include not only interpreting notated materials but also experimenting with various methods of improvisation and exploring extended, personalized sounds on one's instrument. No previous experience with improvisation or contemporary music is required.

Rather than a concert of discreet, single-authored works, we will take a modular and collective approach to music composition in which partially pre-composed musical materials are workshopped and further developed during our rehearsals. No students will be required to compose, but students who wish to submit compositional ideas or materials to the project will have opportunities to do so.

The process of developing this music together will be highly collaborative, but not necessarily egalitarian. I will serve as the ensemble leader and director of the project, soliciting and selecting pre-composed materials from interested students, providing other compositional materials, and overseeing the shaping of the music in rehearsals. I will incorporate creative ideas and input from all ensemble members throughout the process, but I will also make final decisions at times.

Context and goals

This course is taught as a joint ensemble including both undergraduate and graduate students. I will strive to make sure that students with diverse skills and different experience levels can all benefit. For some students, simply the experience of working in this format or of improvising at all will be a new challenge in itself; for other students who are more experienced with contemporary and improvised music, the course will be a chance to deepen their practice, including opportunities to create compositional materials or workshop them with the ensemble. (Time for each student to do so in our rehearsals will be limited, but this is always the case in the "real" world, so such limitations provide important opportunities for practice.)

The methods of music making we will explore in this course have roots in diverse musical communities from

the past century, including not only pan-European but also, and perhaps most significantly, African American traditions. It is also shaped by my studies professional work as a composer-improviser and bandleader over the past several decades, both within and outside of academic institutions. However, students are not required to be familiar with those sub-fields of contemporary music, and all students can succeed in this course by engaging fully with the coursework outlined below.

My goals for this course are that each student, as appropriate to their own level of training, will

- *deepen their understanding of collaboration*, through practical experience participating in a multi-authored musical work
- *experiment with new ways of integrating musical improvisation and composition*, through individual practice as well as group rehearsals and performance
- *confront new challenges and questions as performers*, including exploring unconventional and individualized sounds on their instruments that are new to them

A note about instrumentation

The music we will create will be customized specifically for this group, both in terms of instruments and individuals. However, one practical challenge we will likely face is having a high number of pianists enrolled, since we will rarely have access to more than one or at most two pianos. All pianists who are serious about this course and wish to remain enrolled are welcome to do so, and in the first class meeting I will share some creative strategies to ensure that all pianists can be fully engaged in our project.

In class device usage

Unless you are using a phone, laptop, tablet or other electronic device as part of your musical instrument, I expect you to silence it and put it away when class begins, meaning across the room and not within reach. We need everyone's complete focus in class to make best use of our limited time and even when you are not participating in a section of rehearsal, you are expected to be fully engaged with what is happening. If there is some emergency requiring your attention to a device in class please speak to me beforehand.

Required coursework

As a 2-unit course, I expect you to spend a minimum of 4 hours per week working outside of class on assignments and preparation. The required coursework consists of the following:

1. Attending and actively participating in all class meetings
2. Performing on the final concert, which will be held at 8pm on Tuesday, Dec. 11 (exam week). If you have a conflict at that time please alert me at the start of the quarter.
3. Practicing on your instrument each week, including assigned exercises involving improvisation and sonic exploration, as well as practicing scored materials
4. Completing a small number of non-performative assignments outside of class, such as listening assignments or videos that provide context for our work in class

5. Completing a brief, one-paragraph self-evaluation after the final concert, due by the end of exam week, in which you explain the grade you think you deserve and why, based on the grading criteria below and other information on this syllabus

Required attitude

We will have fun in this course, and we will also approach our work seriously. If you cannot bring a curious, open mind and the same work ethic you apply to your other, more conventional music studies, please drop this course immediately.

Grading and absence policy

Your course grade will be calculated as follows:

50%: Attendance and active participation in all classes and in the final performance (see #1 and #2 under coursework detailed above)

40%: Fully engaging with practice assignments and other assignments outside of class (see #3 and #4 under coursework)

10%: Completing the self-evaluation by the deadline at the end of exam week (see #5 under coursework)

Given our working method in this course, each class meeting is an important step in the music's development and you are therefore expected to attend all class meetings and complete all assignments on time. Your grade will be lowered if you miss classes other than for a genuine emergency or illness. If you are sick on the day of a class meeting, you should visit the doctor and email me documentation of the doctor visit. If you have an emergency that prevents you from attending class, you should inform me by email the day of the class and be able to provide written documentation. If you expect to miss a class meeting for any other reason, you should speak with me in advance to discuss the impact on your course grade.

Special accommodations

If you have a disability that affects your performance in this course, you must visit the [Disabilities Services Center \(https://dsc.uci.edu/\)](https://dsc.uci.edu/) at the beginning of the quarter to ensure a contract is sent to me, then contact me once I have received the DSC contract to discuss any necessary arrangements.

In addition, please note that immigration-related emergencies, including those faced by undocumented students, may qualify for accommodations in the same way as medical or other emergencies.

Academic Integrity

As stated on the website for [UCI's Office of Academic Integrity and Student Conduct \(https://aisc.uci.edu/students/academic-integrity/index.php\)](https://aisc.uci.edu/students/academic-integrity/index.php), "academic misconduct, in its most basic form, is gaining or attempting to gain a grade, degree, or other academic accomplishment by any means other than through

your own work. No student shall engage in any activity that involves attempting to receive a grade by means other than honest effort, and shall not aid another student who is attempting to do so."

This course is highly collaborative, but you must still be careful to avoid representing another person's work as your own, and you must follow all the UCI [policies \(https://aisc.uci.edu/policies/academic-integrity/AcademicIntegrityPolicyApproved-04.23.15.pdf\)](https://aisc.uci.edu/policies/academic-integrity/AcademicIntegrityPolicyApproved-04.23.15.pdf) on academic integrity. Please let me know if you have questions about these policies at any time.

Getting help

If you feel you need help to succeed in this course, please start by making an appointment to see me or visiting me during my office hour (listed above). It is important that you do this early rather than later in the quarter. You can always ask instructors for guidance at any time, but contacting them towards the end of a course is typically far too late to have an impact on your coursework and grade.

Course Summary:

Date	Details	
Thu Oct 25, 2018	 Listening assignment #1 (https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251450)	due by 1:30pm
Thu Nov 1, 2018	 Listening assignment #2 (https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251451)	due by 1:30pm
	 Practice assignment 1 (https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/252931)	due by 3:30pm
Thu Nov 8, 2018	 Listening assignment #3 (https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251452)	due by 1:30pm
	 Practice assignment 2 (https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/252932)	due by 3:30pm
Thu Nov 15, 2018	 Practice assignment 3 (https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/252933)	due by 3:30pm
Sun Dec 16, 2018	 End of quarter self-eval (https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/252930)	due by 11:59pm

Date

Details



[Attendance and participation notes \(https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/256531\)](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/256531)



[Sonic Vocabulary Assignment #1 \(https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/241385\)](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/241385)

Listening assignments 1, 2 and 3

Listening assignment #1, #2 and #3

Given 10/15, due on 10/25, 11/1 and 11/8

Below is a list of albums, in 3 groups. For each of the 3 listening assignments/deadlines listed above, please pick an album from a different group, so that by the end of all 3 assignments, you have listened to one album from each group.

For each assignment, do the following with the album you've chosen, which should take you 2 hours or less each time:

1. Listen to the album at least once, focusing on it completely, without any other tasks or distractions.
2. Optional step: If you wish, search for and read some information on the album online. Note that quality sources can be very enlightening, but many others you'll find online may not be well-informed or helpful.
3. Write a few sentences in response, in the corresponding Canvas Assignment [Listening assignment #1 \(https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251450\)](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251450), [Listening assignment #2 \(https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251451\)](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251451), and [Listening assignment #3 \(https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251452\)](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments/251452) (and be sure to indicate each time which album you chose). A single paragraph is fine, and you can speak to any aspects of the music you choose. This is not an analytic music theory or history assignment, and you are welcome to write from the standpoint of a creative artist engaging with work by others, with no particular constraints other than that your response reflects careful listening and thought. The goal is to generate dialogue and reflection on these recordings, and to give me an idea what you are hearing and thinking.

All of these albums are on Apple Music, so I've provided those links below. Many are probably on other streaming services and some are in the AMC or the library. If you need help accessing any of the albums, please let me know **well in advance**. Please start on this early each week, and consider listening several times throughout the week if you have time.

Finally, if you are already familiar with an album or artist, do not choose it! Try to find one that is unfamiliar.

[Link that might work to an Apple Music playlist with all of these albums \(https://itunes.apple.com/us/playlist/cont-ens-albums/pl.u-zPyLNqvTDGm49\)](https://itunes.apple.com/us/playlist/cont-ens-albums/pl.u-zPyLNqvTDGm49)

Group A:

[Creative Orchestra Music 1976 \(https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/creative-orchestra-music-1976/1266092138\)](https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/creative-orchestra-music-1976/1266092138), by Anthony Braxton

[European Tour 1977 \(https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/european-tour-1977/206005189\)](https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/european-tour-1977/206005189), by the Carla Bley Band

[Space Minds, New Worlds, Survival of America \(https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/space-minds-new-worlds-survival-of-america/59905708\)](https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/space-minds-new-worlds-survival-of-america/59905708), by Leroy Jenkins

[Theoria \(https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/theoria-feat-barry-guy-london-jazz-composers-orchestra\)](https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/theoria-feat-barry-guy-london-jazz-composers-orchestra)

[/797606164](#)), by Irene Schweizer (with Barry Guy and the London Composers Orchestra)

Science Fiction (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/the-complete-science-fiction-sessions/157384509>), by Ornette Coleman

Live at the Bimhuis (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/live-at-the-bimhuis/734416166>), by the Instant Composers Pool

Carry the Day (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/carry-the-day/882683915>), by Henry Threadgill

Journey in Satchidanda (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/journey-in-satchidananda/72774>), by Alice Coltrane

Big Band (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/big-band/95819821>), by Julius Hemphill

Afternoon of a Georgia Faun (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/afternoon-of-a-georgia-faun/272149620>), by Marion Brown

Group B:

Sequel (for Lester Bowie) (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/sequel-for-lester-bowie/897185579>), by George E. Lewis

RedHanded (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/cooke-india-redhanded/456266701>), by India Cooke

Nuba (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/nuba/318169158>), by Andrew Cyrille, Jeanne Lee and Jimmy Lyons

Tiananmen! (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/tiananmen/305878083>), by Jon Jang and the Pan-Asian Arkestra

As Was (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/as-was/1029284130>), by Rova (saxophone quartet)

What is the difference between stripping and playing the violin? (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/what-is-difference-between-stripping-playing-violin/686844881>), by the (Miya) Masaoka Orchestra

Yankees (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/yankees/441439867>), by Derek Bailey, George E. Lewis and John Zorn

Joelle Leandre Project (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/jo%C3%ABlle-l%C3%A9andre-project/27166006>), by Leandre/Crispell/Lovens/Teitelbaum/Zingaro

MEV 40 (1967-2007) (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/mev-40-1967-2007/401735642>), by Musica Elettronica Viva

Toward the Margins (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/toward-the-margins/273073209>), by the Evan Parker Electro-Acoustic Ensemble

Group C:

Perception (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/perception/1318073463>), by Susie Ibarra

Chants (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/chants/624721329>), by the Craig Taborn Trio

The Inner Spectrum of Variables (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/inner-spectrum-variables-feat-corey-smythe-chris-tordini/1256771652>), by Tyshawn Sorey

Wet Robots (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/wet-robots/1399686576>), by Fay Victor's SoundNoiseFUNK

Save Your Breath (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/save-your-breath/989184965>), by Kris Davis' Infrasound

Radif Suite (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/radif-suite/1256730909>), by Amir ElSaffar and Hafez

Modirzadeh

Serpentines (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/serpentine/1167772528>), by Ingrid Laubrock

Song of Silver Geese (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/song-of-silver-geese/1296423504>), by Jen Shyu

Mise en Abime (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/mise-en-ab%C3%A9me-feat-steve-lehman-jonathan-finlayson/1256757984>), by Steve Lehman

Improvisation practice assignments instructions

Improvisation practice assignments 1, 2 and 3

Given 10/22, due on 11/1, 11/8 and 11/15

These assignments involve practicing improvisation outside of class, either individually or in small groups. The goal is to help support the music we're developing together as an ensemble as well as to create a feeling of shared commitment around improvisation practice during the quarter. For those that want some starting points, I've listed some possible "recipes" below, and others can work on open improvisation or invent their own approaches.

Assignments 1 and 2 are in weeks that overlap with the Listening Assignments 2 and 3, so in those weeks (following the 4 hours/week expectation on the syllabus), please spend about 2 hours per week on the listening assignment and 2 more per week on practicing. For the 3rd of these, please use the whole 4 hours, since there is no listening that week.

If you prefer to work individually or can't coordinate groups with others, you can use the individual option, but if some of you can practice in small groups, feel free to do that instead (or in addition). A student asked about more small group improvising, and although I want to continue using class time for the full ensemble, the request made me realize that it could be interesting to fold in some small group assignments outside of class to what we're developing for the concert. For example, if a particular duo or trio has been working together for a few weeks and it feels appropriate, we could feature an improvisation by them as part of our piece, either alone or with the rest of the ensemble providing backgrounds and dialogue via conduction.

Instructions for each week's assignment

Using open improvisation or any of the recipes/options below, practice for the amount of time listed above over the week, either in your individual practice sessions or with a group of other students. If you're working alone, I recommend splitting this up over several sessions. If you're with a group, you'll probably want to do one or two longer sessions, and if possible please consider working with the same group over all 3 weeks, to cultivate something together.

By class time each week (starting with #1 for Nov. 1st), please upload a short audio file to the corresponding Canvas [Assignment \(https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments\)](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/assignments), as an example of something you've worked on that week. It only needs to be a few minutes, to give me an idea of what you're doing. You can also leave comments/questions if you wish, and I'll try to respond and provide feedback. A single file is fine for groups, but in that case, please tell me who you all are.

Optional recipes and suggestions

You are welcome to simply work on open improvisation, but if you would like starting points, here are some recipe ideas below. For all of them, I suggest trying these practice techniques:

- experiment with different durations, setting a timer to force yourself to create a piece of that length
- record yourself once in a while, and listen back the next day
- take notes so you can remember approaches you want to develop further, that worked well or didn't, that you liked or hated, etc.
- recall Anthony Braxton's [instruction \(https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/discussion_topics/152551\)](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/11995/discussion_topics/152551) to "Have fun with this material and don't get hung up with any one area"

Melodic improvisation over a drone

Find some kind of pitched drone (such as a single note or a P5 diad), either by creating one on your own, searching for a recording online (try googling "tanpura drone recording," for example), or using an app or drone generator. Pick a scale or mode and experiment with constructing melodies over it, creating forms with different durations. Try different modes or stick with the same mode all week. Try using simple melodic gestures but experimenting with ornamentation.

Animal sounds backdrop

Using the same [Macaulay Library \(https://www.macaulaylibrary.org\)](https://www.macaulaylibrary.org) from the first assignment, or any other source, find a recording of animal sounds that is at least 5 minutes or more, and practice creating a short piece of music in dialogue with it. Try out different approaches, such as melodic playing, textural/sonic playing, using harmony, using silences or varying density levels and dynamics.

Rhythmic construction

Put on a metronome to establish a pulse, then using un-pitched sounds (on your instrument, body or any object), create a rhythmic improvisation along with it. Consider different methods such as starting with a short idea and developing it slowly; creating a sensation of shifting meters/divisions; or creating a back and forth dialogue between 2 highly contrasting ideas. Invent others.

Intervallic construction

Pick 2 different intervals and their inversion (for example, m2/M7 and m3/M6). Improvise melodic compositions that use only those intervals (or their octave equivalents) between successive notes. This is fantastic practice for both ear training and mastery of your instrument/voice. Highly recommended for anyone who wants to improvise within traditions that involve navigating complex pitch structures (such as jazz).

Timbral construction

Limit yourself to 3 or fewer notes (or even just 1) and construct short pieces (I recommend around 3 minutes each) that depend for their development almost entirely on timbral contrasts rather than pitch or rhythmic relationships. Try to create as much interest over time as possible through timbre alone.

Limited pitches

Limit yourself to 3 or 4 pitches and create short pieces using only those notes, building forms and maintaining interest through rhythm, timbre, dynamics, density variation, or other dimensions.

Steal

Find a composition for your instrument, either something you know or something that is new to you. Pick a couple measures either intentionally or randomly, and practice building up short improvised pieces by "sampling" those fragments from the composition. Consider extending the written fragments by radically

altering any aspect (i.e. pitches, rhythms, tempo), or juxtaposing disparate sections to create a dialogue over time.

In the news

Read, listen or watch the news to discover something new to you that evokes a strong emotional response (horrifying, beautiful, sad, touching, outrageous, etc.). Improvise a short piece in response. Give it a name.

Poetry

Spend a little time at the [Poetry Foundation](https://www.poetryfoundation.org) (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org>) or use their excellent app (with a cool "spin" feature) to find a poem you enjoy. Print it or put it on a screen, then improvise a piece in response. Try different approaches like tracking through it with sounds that respond to the feeling of each line; reading it in focused way first, then playing a piece in response; or imitating the rhythm/pacing of specific lines, jumping around out of order and constructing your own path through it.