

## Syllabus

### Creative Practices Seminar (MUS 209), Winter 2015

Michael Dessen, University of California, Irvine

Course meets: Thursdays, 1:30-4:20pm, MM 218, NoCap

My office: 3023 Contemporary Arts Center

Office hours: By appointment

Email: mdessen@uci.edu

### Course Description

This course is part of a three-quarter sequence required for first-year MFA students in the Integrated Composition, Improvisation and Technology emphasis. The goals of this course are:

- To help you develop your individual creative practice, through composing a substantial new work and organizing rehearsals of it and a public performance on our class concert
- To expose you to diverse forms of contemporary composition, help you develop methods for studying other people's music, and improve your presentation skills, through analysis projects
- To gain new performative experiences with collaborative and improvisational music, through participating in a group piece that I will lead/facilitate
- To help you articulate ideas related to your own music, through writing and revising program notes for your piece
- To practice providing constructive feedback to other composers, through in-class group critiques

### Coursework

1. Composition project: You'll propose this piece in the first week's writing assignment (see handout attached to this syllabus), and work on it throughout the quarter, showing work-in-progress as indicated in the schedule. Note that you are responsible for finding the performers and running rehearsals outside of class time. If you have trouble finding players, I can help with that if you inform me early. You must also submit program notes for your piece (see schedule for due date), and revise them as needed after receiving feedback.

2. Group piece: I will lead/facilitate a collaborative piece that we will develop gradually throughout the quarter and possibly include on the concert. You should bring your instrument to class for those days where the group piece is scheduled, and practice individual parts as needed.

3. Analysis projects: You will do one individual presentation on a piece you choose, and two group presentations on pieces that I assign. More details are in a handout attached to this syllabus. You'll propose your individual piece in the first week's writing assignment, and I'll assign the pieces/groups for collaborative presentations early in the quarter.

4. Attendance and participation: Giving constructive feedback to your peers in class is an important and required part of this course, as is your participation in the final concert as a performer and producer (i.e. contributing to tech support and publicity).

### Deadlines and attendance

Failing to meet any scheduled deadlines will lower your course grade, and failing to meet a major deadline (such as the individual analysis presentation or the last work-in-progress session) or failing multiple times to meet smaller ones will result in a failing course grade. Since participation in discussions is a crucial part of graduate seminars, any absences or lateness, excluding genuine emergencies or illness, will significantly lower your course grade. More than one unexcused absence will result in a failing course grade.

### Grading

Your grade will be based on all the required work listed above, as follows:

- Composition project: 50%
- Analysis projects: 25%
- Attendance and participation: 25%

You must also email me by noon Friday of exam week with a self-evaluation that explains the grade you think you deserve and why, along with a self-critique of your composition project and a final copy of your score and

program notes. This email does not need to be an essay; two or three concise paragraphs is enough.

**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 and the individual presentation should be your own work, and you must always cite any sources you use. See UCI Academic Honesty policies at <[honesty.uci.edu](http://honesty.uci.edu)>, and be sure to contact me if you have any doubts about citation practices.

**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**

It is always important to seek help early. If you ever need to meet, simply email me some specific times when you are free, and I will reply quickly to arrange a meeting time.

**Attached pages below with more details:**

- Weekly schedule
- Week 1 Writing Assignment
- Presentation Guidelines

## **Schedule (Dessen, MUS 209, Winter 2015)**

Notes:

- In the first class, we'll decide the order of your individual presentations (the numbered due dates below).
- Mid-quarter, I may end a couple classes 30-40 minutes early in return for requiring you to attend a mini-lesson at another time that week with visiting composers who are finalists in our faculty search.

### Week 1, Thurs. Jan. 8:

- Course introduction
- Start group piece

### Week 2, Thursday, Jan. 15:

Instead of meeting as a group this day, I will schedule 30-minute individual meetings with each of you for Friday 1/16, to discuss your proposed piece. The week 1 writing assignment is due by 1pm on Thursday.

### Week 3, Thursday, Jan 22:

- Work-in-progress session #1 (10-15 minutes each)
- Continue group piece

### Week 4, Thursday, Jan 29:

- Individual presentations 1, 2 and 3
- Special topic presentation TBA

### Week 5, Thursday, February 5:

- Work-in-progress session #2 (10-15 minutes each)
- Individual presentations 4 and 5

### Week 6, Thursday, February 12:

- Possible guest composer visit this day
- Continue group piece

### Week 7, Thursday, February 19:

- Work-in-progress session #3 (30 minutes each). Bring a complete or nearly complete draft of the score, recorded rehearsal excerpts, and a first draft of your program notes.

### Week 8, Thursday, February 26:

- Collaborative presentation #1 (both groups)
- Continue group piece

### Week 9, Thursday, March 5:

- Complete draft of score due, with either an in-class reading or (if the performers are not available) a recording of one from a rehearsal. For each person, we'll take roughly 30 minutes to hear the piece and have a brief discussion.

### Week 10, Thursday, February 12:

- Collaborative presentation #2 (both groups)
- Final rehearsal of group piece

The class concert date will be decided early in the quarter, but will most likely be late in week 10 or early in exam week.

## **Week 1 writing assignment (Dessen, MUS 209, Winter 2015)**

Due: 1pm on Thursday, January 15

Please address the following in a googledoc shared with me (mdessen@uci.edu).

1. In a few paragraphs, discuss your current interests and goals as a musician. Generally speaking, what kind of music do you want to create, and why?
2. Discuss weak areas you need to work on in order to better accomplish those goals.
3. Propose a short composition project that 1) addresses both points above, i.e. it gives you an opportunity to continue developing your creative practice, and 2) is realistic in scope, i.e. you can compose and rehearse it during this 10-week quarter. It is your responsibility to arrange for the performers, but if you need help with that, let me know immediately. Please answer these questions about your proposed piece:
  - What is the instrumentation?
  - Who are the performers who have already 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?
  - What kinds of technology support, if any, will you need for the concert performance?
  - What duration do you expect the piece to have?
  - Briefly discuss the idea(s) behind the piece, the kind of compositional method you expect to use, and how the piece relates to question #1 above.
  - In what kind of context or venue would you want to present this music, if it weren't for this course?
4. Propose a piece of music - created by an established musician or group sometime during the last half-century or so - 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 on the next page.)

## **Presentation guidelines (Dessen, MUS 209, Winter 2015)**

For this course, you'll do three analysis projects/presentations. The first is an individual project on a piece you choose, and the other two are group projects on pieces I'll assign. In each case, I expect you to research and study the piece and prepare a presentation of roughly 20-30 minutes, to be followed by group discussion, not exceeding 40 minutes total.

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 pieces presented in class will also expose us to a variety of works and ideas in contemporary music. A final goal of these assignments is simply for you to practice your presentation skills.

For your presentations, try to choose a compelling angle and discuss *both broader ideas you think are at work in the piece as well as specific examples of details that show how those ideas are executed*. The format of the presentation is up to you, but I strongly recommend some kind of handout or slideshow to help get the most out of the limited time. Please design any handouts or slideshows so that they help you give a more effective presentation in the time constraints, rather than using them as dumping grounds for extensive information that you won't actually have time to talk about.

Start your presentation by providing a *very* concise, 2-3 minute introduction of the composer. (We can all look up information online ourselves, and the piece, not the composer's biography, should be the focus of your presentation.) What contexts do they work in and how does this particular piece fit into their overall output?

Please use the following questions and suggestions to guide the rest of your presentation:

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 analysis tools you learned in undergraduate theory classes. If those help, feel free to use them, but be sure to think carefully about what approaches best suit the piece itself. In some cases you might discover published work that provides helpful insights into the piece or into its genre, by scholars or by the composer herself. If you do draw on any published work, cite all sources carefully.

If the piece is long, you may only have time to play excerpts. Try to plan carefully so that you can get across your ideas and share audio-visual materials within the time constraints.

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