

Course Syllabus

Contemporary Ensemble, Spring 2023

MUS 276, course code 04840, 2 units

Instructor: Michael Dessen, mdessen@uci.edu (<mailto:mdessen@uci.edu>)

Course meets: Thursdays 4pm-5:50pm, MM 218

Final concert (required): Tuesday, May 30 (time TBD)

Office hour: Please email me your available times a few days in advance to schedule a meeting

Course overview and goals

Welcome! In this graduate-level ensemble course, we will develop and perform a telematic concert of original music integrating composition and improvisation. I will lead the ensemble and also participate as a performer. Our concert in week 9, detailed below, will be featured on a professional arts festival in Manizales, Colombia, where I will be performing with you via the internet; you will perform from UCI.

The approach to integrating composition and improvisation that I bring to this class has roots in diverse communities, including those formed by Black American musicians in the 1960s who began referring to their work with the term "creative music." Students are *not* required to have any prior experience with improvisation, and neither are they required to compose or lead a piece, but all students *are* required to perform (including improvising) and to participate in the collaborative process. Please be aware that because our focus is on improvisatory music, scored materials may be added or changed up until the concert, though any materials requiring significant individual practice will be set well in advance.

The goal of this course is to give you an opportunity to

- *deepen your understanding of integrated composition and improvisation, and specifically of composer-bandleader models of music creation*, through rehearsals/performance, individual and collaborative practice sessions, and listening/reflection assignments;
- *improve your collaboration skills*, through small group practice assignments and classes;
- *expand your sonic vocabulary and skill as improvisers*, through individual practice assignments and interacting within the ensemble; and
- *gain experience with telematic music*, through developing and performing original telematic works

Required work and scheduling notes

As this is a 2-unit class, in addition to our weekly 2-hour meetings, I expect you to spend 4 hours total each week working outside of class. (Composing a piece is optional and therefore not included in that workload, but as noted below, I can offer additional units for composing via a MUS 299 independent study if you wish.)

- **Weekly assignments, in weeks 1-8:** Weekly out of class assignments will include individual practice exercises on your instrument (or preparing a composition/piece, if you choose to do that); duo/trio collaboration sessions; and listening/reflection assignments.
- **Concert participation, in week 9:** On Tuesday, May 30, you must be available for 5-6 hours total for the soundcheck/rehearsal and the performance (the specific times that day will be set early in the quarter). We will not meet that Thursday (June 1st) or have any out of class assignments that week, to account for this commitment.
- **Week 10 and Exam Week:** We will have a final class meeting as usual in week 10. We will not meet in exam week.

Concert details

The term “networked music performance” refers to live performance via the internet by musicians in different geographic locations. Many artists also use the term “telematic music” to refer to new musical works that are created specifically for this networked medium. I have been [working](https://mdessen.com/portfolio/telematics/)  (<https://mdessen.com/portfolio/telematics/>) in the telematic music field since 2007, with many collaborators in the US and beyond.

The weekend before our concert, I will travel to Manizales, Colombia and from there, I will be co-directing the event and performing with you on the [Festival Internacional de la Imagen](https://festivaldelaimagen.com/en/convocatoria2023/)  (<https://festivaldelaimagen.com/en/convocatoria2023/>), a yearly festival featuring a wide range of contemporary artists, designers and thinkers. Our concert is part of "Tele Espacios Activos," a series within the festival directed by my collaborator Professor Mario Valencia of the University of Caldas, who began it in 2013 as a way to explore telepresence in the arts. At UCI, we will invite a small audience to the concert in Mocap. (We are not currently planning to stream the concert online, but we will record it.)

The concert will include one work by a Colombian composer that does not involve the UCI ensemble, but otherwise, our current plan is to dedicate the rest of the program to our telematic ensemble. It is also likely that one additional performer in Colombia (a professional musician and faculty member at the university there) will join us on part or all of our performance, and they would rehearse with us remotely several times during the quarter. (I will confirm the specific person/instrument asap.)

ICIT grads will note that this concert is in the same week as the ICIT student showcase in Smith Hall, which was unavoidable. However, as explained in the section above, I am planning carefully so that

your workload for that week will be the same as all other weeks (i.e. 5-6 hours total). To reduce end of quarter stress, we will also prepare all the music gradually throughout the quarter, and tech support at UCI will be provided by graduate students who are not members of our class, and who I will train in advance.

Optional composing opportunity

As noted above, composing/leading a piece is optional in this class, but all enrolled students are invited to do so. I will likely contribute one or more compositions and/or develop some music collectively with the ensemble, and our concert may also include some open, collective improvisation. As the ensemble leader and instructor, I will oversee the workshopping of all music throughout the quarter, and make final decisions on the content of the program.

If you do wish to compose/lead a piece for the ensemble, please note:

- The work needs to involve substantial improvisation and collaborative development with the ensemble over the quarter, rather than being a fully notated score. This does not preclude composing detailed staff notations that require practice and rehearsal, as long as they are provided well in advance.
- If you want to compose/lead a piece, I will set different expectations for many of your weekly assignments to allow for some time for that, but it will not be a huge amount of time so please plan the scale of your piece accordingly (i.e. develop a piece through in-class workshopping of materials that require minimal pre-compositional time). If needed, I am also willing to supervise a 2-unit MUS 299 so that you can earn more units for the composing work, but please inform me by Friday of week 1 if you wish to do this.
- In composing, please take into account that due to the distance, there will be some audio latency between UCI and Colombia, most likely around 250 ms round trip (i.e. someone playing there in unison with you will sound to you a 16th note late at quarter=60). Visual latency will be even higher. If you wish to take a 299, we can have more detailed discussions about composing for the telematic stage, and you can also find more resources on this topic through research.
- The production team in Colombia includes designers and they are planning a complex visual design for the concert involving projection mapping, including finding ways to relate it to the "[XENOLandscapes](https://festivaldelaimagen.com/en/convocatoria2023/)  [\(https://festivaldelaimagen.com/en/convocatoria2023/\)](https://festivaldelaimagen.com/en/convocatoria2023/)." theme of this year's festival. If you would like to integrate visual materials into your composition, they'd be excited to collaborate on that aspect, and I am happy to bring you into our production planning process to whatever degree you wish (i.e. you could just explain your visual ideas/content to me, or I can invite you to our Zoom meetings if you'd like to be more closely involved).
- You must prepare an initial draft or at least fragments of your piece that we can begin workshopping in a first rehearsal by the time of our class meeting in week 3, and submit revised

drafts as needed after all rehearsals.

- You must send me a one-paragraph program note for your piece two weeks before the concert date.

Weekly class time and setup

Some performers in our ensemble may need sound reinforcement or require electronics. I will arrive by 3:45pm to start getting out necessary equipment. I expect you to be in the space with your own instrument out and ready to start by 4pm, including helping with equipment set up at that time. With practice, we can get the set up time down to 15 minutes or less, so that we can have roughly 90 minutes to rehearse each week.

Communications

Please be sure to set up your Canvas Notifications so that you receive Announcements and Messages immediately (not daily or weekly digest). The class email list address <04840-S23@classmail.eee.uci.edu> (<mailto:04840-S23@classmail.eee.uci.edu>) is a Discussion list so can be used by any of us to communicate with the group, and is also archived in the course under "ClassMail Archive" in the course Canvas menu. You're also welcome to communicate here in Canvas in the "[Open discussion for anything related to this course](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/53984/discussion_topics/882820?wrap=1)" (https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/53984/discussion_topics/882820?wrap=1)."

Grading criteria

I will let you know if your work at any time during the quarter falls below "B" quality. By the end of finals week, you are required to submit a *brief* (2 or 3 sentences) self-evaluation explaining the grade you think you earned and why, based on these criteria:

- 50%: Punctual attendance and active participation in all classes and in the final performance
- 50%: Fully engaging with all practice and listening assignments outside of class

I will assign your course grade taking into account my own evaluation along with your own.

If you cannot attend any class meeting due to genuine emergency or illness, please inform me as soon as possible. Given the nature of this class and the fact that we only meet once per week, attendance is crucial, so missing 30% or more of our weekly meetings (i.e. 3 or more out of 10 total) for any reason may result in a failing grade.

Help and accommodations

If you need help with any aspect of the coursework, please email me your available times to make an

appointment, or visit during my office hour. If you have a disability that requires accommodations, you must ensure that I receive a contract from the [Disabilities Services Center \(https://dsc.uci.edu/\)](https://dsc.uci.edu/) at the beginning of the quarter, then contact me 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 and inclusivity

Many activities in this course are collaborative, but you must be always careful to *avoid representing another person's work as your own*. Any attempt to do so will be considered an academic integrity violation, and will be reported.

My intention is always to facilitate welcoming environments for collective learning, in the spirit of the [UC's system-wide policies on diversity. \(https://diversity.universityofcalifornia.edu/policies-guidelines/\)](https://diversity.universityofcalifornia.edu/policies-guidelines/) Those policies define diversity as "the variety of personal experiences, values, and worldviews that arise from differences of culture and circumstance" and "include race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, language, abilities/disabilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and geographic region, and more." I expect all of us to help create a supportive environment, to communicate with one another in respectful, constructive ways, and to understand the presence of different life experiences in our classroom as a learning opportunity for us all. By remaining in the course after reading this syllabus, you are affirming that you share these intentions.

Thank you for reading the entire syllabus. I look forward to working with you!