

Contemporary Ensemble, Spring 2026



Course Syllabus, Contemporary Ensemble, Spring 2026 (MUS 276, code 04840)

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

Class meets: Wednesdays, 4pm-5:50pm in MM 218

Course description and goals

Welcome! This is a graduate-level course focused on contemporary music performance. It is taught by different core faculty in the Music Department's PhD program in Integrated Composition, Improvisation and Technology (ICIT), and it takes a variety of forms depending on the instructor and the year. The course is taken predominantly by ICIT PhD students but it is open to all Music graduate students, and to other students by instructor permission. Students taking the course this quarter should have an advanced performance practice and be committed to exploring improvisatory and collaborative music making.

This spring, we will develop and perform a set of improvisatory musical works, most likely with some pieces involving the full group and others performed by smaller subgroups. We'll collaborate on decisions about the repertoire and program, and as instructor I will oversee that process and provide guidance and materials as needed. The music we end up working on will necessarily depend on the instrumentation, interests and abilities of the students who enroll. We have already begun loose planning discussions during winter quarter, and by early spring quarter, we'll finalize an overall framework so that we can spend the rest of the quarter focusing on specific pieces, subgroups and ideas.

This course is designed to give you opportunities to do the following:

- Deepen your practice and expand your sonic vocabulary as an improvising musician through rehearsals/performance and listening assignments
- Improve your collaboration skills, through small group practice assignments and in-class work
- Gain experience with creative concert planning/production, through the end of quarter performance(s)

Coursework and expectations

In-class work: The class meets for 2 hours per week, and we'll have both Mocap and the REALab reserved in case we need both spaces. Our weekly class sessions are very important for developing

the music and plans together, so attendance each week is critical.

Outside of class work: As this is a 2-unit course, I also expect you to spend roughly 4 hours per week outside of class on additional work. In most weeks, that will include the expectation of one or two subgroup rehearsals, in addition to individual practice. Occasionally, I may also ask you to complete short listening assignments, for historical context or inspiration.

End of quarter concert(s): By early spring quarter, we will set a date for at least one final performance, either on campus (most likely in Mocap) and/or off-campus (venue TBD). Participation in the concert(s), including assisting with production support, is expected of all students.

In-class device (non-)usage

Unless you are using a phone, laptop, tablet or other electronic device as part of your musical instrument or to read scores, I expect you to silence it and put it away when class begins. We need everyone's complete focus in class to make best use of our limited time, so even when you are not participating in a section of rehearsal, I expect you to be fully engaged with what is happening in the room, not engaging somewhere else through a screen. If there is some emergency requiring your attention to a mobile device in class, please speak to me before class so that I am aware of this.

Instrument/tech setup

For instruments needing sound reinforcement or live electronics, I expect you to provide all your own equipment and have it set up by the start of class, or as soon after as possible. For this year's course, rather than using a shared PA/mixer and monitors, I am proposing that we simplify our tech setup/concept by asking each musician to be responsible for their own gear and sound, and to handle any amplification needs with a single speaker/amp located next to them. (We have a number of powered monitors in the REALab that can be checked out for this purpose.) If there are strong objections to this, we can talk about it, but my hope is that this constraint will simplify our setup and allow us to keep the focus on playing music together rather than complex audio configurations.

Attendance and grading

Attendance: If you cannot attend 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 classes (i.e. 3 out of 10) for any reason may result in a failing course grade.

Overall course grade: Your course grade will be based on the following two criteria, weighted equally:

- 50%: Punctual attendance and active participation in all classes and in the final performance(s)

- 50%: Fully engaging with all outside of class assignments (weekly practice assignments and any listening assignments)

I will let you know if I think 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* self-evaluation explaining the grade you think you earned and why, based on these criteria above. (One or two sentences is plenty!) I will assign your course grade taking into account my own evaluation along with your own. If you fail to submit the self-evaluation by Friday of finals week, I will lower your grade by up to a letter grade.

Help and accommodations

If you cannot complete the course work and activities or are struggling for any reason, please see me as soon as possible so that I can help or discuss alternatives. If you have accommodation requests related to a disability, you must contact the UCI Disabilities Services Center at the beginning of the quarter and have them send me the accommodations request, then follow up with me to discuss it.

Academic integrity and inclusivity

The main work in this course is embodied performance, but as a general rule for all coursework you must be always be careful to *avoid representing another person's work as your own*. Any attempt to represent another person's work as your own will be considered an academic integrity violation, and will be reported.

My intention is always to facilitate welcoming, inclusive and respectful environments for collective learning among diverse students, in the spirit of the [UC's system-wide policies on diversity](https://diversity.universityofcalifornia.edu/about/)  (<https://diversity.universityofcalifornia.edu/about/>). By remaining in the course after reading this syllabus, you are affirming that you share those intentions.

Thank you for reading the entire syllabus. I look forward to making music with you this quarter!