

Course Syllabus

Improvisation

Michael Dessen, UC Irvine

MUS 231 (4 units), course code 04784, Spring 2021

Course meets: Fridays, 1pm-3:50pm (online)

Zoom link: Available to enrolled students under "Zoom" in Canvas course space menu

My office hour: I am happy to meet with you by appointment. Just [email me](mailto:mdessen@uci.edu) (<mailto:mdessen@uci.edu>) your available times a few days beforehand.

Course summary

This is a graduate-level course on music improvisation. It is open to all Music graduate students with an active performance practice, regardless of background or instrument. Coursework includes collaborative creative projects, listening/study assignments and a short research presentation. Weekly 3-hour class meetings will be used for group performance, discussions and presentations by the instructor and possibly guest artists.

Course context and goals

Defined broadly, improvisation is part of virtually all music traditions. This vastness, and the slipperiness of the concept itself, make precise boundaries for the topic impossible. But during the past half century, musicians have also given this word more specific associations: Using phrases like improvised music, free/open improvisation, non-idiomatic improvisation and creative music, musicians have organized new communities and articulated radical notions of freedom.

Contrary to stereotypes, many artists in these worlds stress that freedom and spontaneity do not negate the importance of history, memory and training. For example, I once asked my teacher Yusef Lateef - who termed his own music [autophysiopsyche music](https://www.amacad.org/publication/yusef-lateefs-autophysiopsyche-quest)  (<https://www.amacad.org/publication/yusef-lateefs-autophysiopsyche-quest>), meaning "music from one's physical, mental and spiritual self" - why he refused to use the word "improvisation." In his 70s at the time, he replied that the dictionary defined the term as acting "without preparation," and that regardless of whether or not he was using precomposed materials, "every note I play on my saxophone has over six decades of preparation."

Our approach to the topic of improvisation in this course reflects these histories and contradictions. It is indebted both to African American improviser-composers who have expanded our sense of the

term in profound ways, and to countless other artists in global and intercultural fields of improvised music.

In that spirit, this course will *not* focus on training you to improvise within a specific musical idiom or language (i.e. jazz-based harmonic forms, Arabic maqam, Indian raga/tala, etc.). Those kinds of studies are crucially important, but in this course, our goals are instead the following:

- Through small group projects and individual practice/study, you will practice and deepen your ability to create music collectively in real time, with few or no pre-composed materials, including with musicians who come from backgrounds different than your own.
- Through listening-focused assignments, presentations and discussions, you will expand your knowledge of prominent musical artists and communities that emphasize highly improvisatory, collective forms of musical exploration.

Creative projects

Students will be expected to do 2 short rehearsals outside of class each week. Some groups will rotate weekly and others will be more consistent; the details will depend on class size and student preferences. Students may propose to use some of this time for a self-directed project, including one with musicians who are not taking the class (i.e. a pre-existing ensemble or one requiring specific skills not in the class). However, all students must also participate regularly in class-based groups.

Each student is expected to contribute their own individual sound and ideas to the group's music, while also responding to others. This ability to draw on your training and skills while engaging with what other musicians bring in the moment is a skill that can be practiced, and that practice is central to this course.

Rather than a live networked concert, I propose that we focus on making recordings throughout the quarter, to eventually create an album of selected tracks. If there is strong interest in a live performance instead, we can change this plan, but we will decide by week 3 at the latest.

Listening assignments and presentations

Each week, you will be asked to listen in a focused way to assigned tracks, and to discuss your reactions in class. Many of these tracks will be from the 2nd half of the 20th century, and some will be more recent. I will usually give a short presentation to introduce the assigned listening in the previous class. Some assignments may include reading or viewing but the main focus is on listening. Assignments and class plans are summarized on the [Weekly Schedule](https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/35080/pages/weekly-schedule-and-listening-assignments) (<https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/35080/pages/weekly-schedule-and-listening-assignments>) page and track details for assigned listening are on the [Listening assignments](#)

(<https://canvas.eee.uci.edu/courses/35080/pages/listening-assignments>)_ page.

In addition to these weekly assignments, you will also do research on a topic of your choice throughout the quarter, and share it in a 15-minute presentation in our final exam week meeting. You will be asked to identify the topic by mid-quarter, and I will be available to meet individually to offer research suggestions as needed.

Time management and collaboration

I consider a 4-unit class to represent roughly 6-8 hours per week of work outside of class. In this course, that time is roughly split between the group rehearsals and the listening/research work. As graduate students, I also expect you to approach this course as a collective laboratory, and to contribute in ways that advance both your own learning and that of the group. If you have any collaborative challenges, confusion about how to participate, or trouble keeping up with the workload, please tell me and I will help.

Playing together via internet

Although this course is fully online, we are fortunate to have audio equipment and ethernet cables that can be checked out from the Music Department if needed. My expectation is that all students will have access to a computer, ethernet connection, an audio interface, microphone and over-ear headphones. If you lack any of this equipment, let me know at the start of the quarter.

We will use the free app [Sonobus](https://sonobus.net)  (<https://sonobus.net>) for playing together. If noticeable latency is at times unavoidable, such as when a player is located far away or when someone's network quality is too low, we will find creative musical solutions. If necessary, we will use asynchronous methods of improvising together, but I am hopeful that real-time playing will work.

Evaluation criteria and special accommodations

I will let you know if your work overall ever falls below "B" quality. By the end of finals week, you must submit a very brief self-evaluation explaining the grade you think you earned, based on these criteria, equally important:

- Completing all assignments on time, including attending rehearsals and arriving prepared for class meetings
- Constructive collaboration in all activities and discussions, which includes listening as well as speaking

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

Participation in all class meetings is required, and you must contact me if an illness or emergency

prevents you from attending. Because the group work during class time is a central aspect of this course, missing more than 2 classes for any reason is grounds for a grade of C or lower. Within these policies, I will be as accommodating as possible, but it is your responsibility to communicate difficulties to me right away. If you prefer to talk rather than explain over email, just send me a message saying so, and listing your available times.

If you have a disability that affects your performance in this course, you must document it through the [Disabilities Services \(https://dsc.uci.edu/\)](https://dsc.uci.edu/) Center by the end of the week 1.

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!

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