

LONGY SCHOOL OF MUSIC OF BARD COLLEGE
TH505A: COMPOSITION FOR PERFORMERS
COURSE SYLLABUS: SPRING 2020

Instructor: Dr. John H. Morrison

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Class Website: <http://jhmedu.org/CforP/>

Office Hours: Tuesday and Wednesday, noon, Room L-10 (unless reserved by someone) or by appointment

Credit Hours: 1

Meeting Times: Friday 10:00 – 11:55

Meeting Place: Room L-10

Reserve text: *Music Notation* by Gardner Read; MT 35.R253 M9 1979

COURSE DESCRIPTION, RATIONALE, AND GOALS

Composing music is the surest way to gain insight into the nuts and bolts of music. Once a person begins making decisions about what goes into a piece of music, when to introduce ideas, how to develop them, what impact one desires to create, and a variety of other factors that determine what a composition will be, one hears the music of all periods differently. In fact, composing music opens one's perception to the same issues in any creative medium, particularly those which unfold in time.

Performers already have great insight into such matters, of course, and a well-developed sense of what works for their instrument, voice, or ensemble. Sharing that knowledge with other performers, whether by talking or demonstrating, can create a level of knowledge about another's instrument or voice that can allow that person to compose music for one's instrument much better-adapted to it than would be the case otherwise.

The goal of the course is to provide opportunities to compose music informed by such sharing. The goal of the course is most definitely *not* to impart a compositional style or set of beliefs from instructor to student, but to set up conditions that allow each person to discover and pursue the aesthetic world one wishes to pursue. The most practical goal for the semester is that each person will have at least one piece performed on our final concert, which is not yet scheduled but will be either the last week of class, or during exam-jury period.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND PROCEDURES

Class meetings will consist of presentations and discussions focused on a number of subjects, including compositional topics (style, techniques, notation, and so forth), potentials of one's instrument or voice, music studied together, and the pieces composed by class members.

Everyone will have a short assignment every week, and all class members will be expected to play every week. Therefore it is expected that everyone will attend every class. In our second meeting, each person will demonstrate the capabilities of his or her instrument for the class, primarily by composing something for it, but also by demonstrating technical features of the instrument and its notation in a handout. This composing may include either a collection of short ideas (8-10 notes each, e.g.) and short pieces (10 or so measures, no more than 30 seconds or so). The next week, each person will compose for someone else's instrument or voice. We will do the second step one more time in week three, this time asking each person to write for another instrument or voice not his/her own. Feedback and comments about fine-tuning the outcome will emerge when that person encounters the music. Thoughts on how one might work with strong ideas in a piece will inevitably be topics for discussion as well.

If something remarkable has happened as one explores the instruments in our class, then one may have discovered the beginning of a piece! But it doesn't matter if that happens or not. It will

be important to try out things in the early stages, not only the instruments, but compositional approaches as well. Seriously and fully exploring a musical objective might sometimes mean the result isn't satisfying, but allowing a sense of play and experimentation to rule will relieve the pressure to compose the great masterpiece.

After writing for oneself and two others, it will be time to start composing for more than one part, and aiming for the final project. In the middle weeks, everyone is expected to bring work in progress for a group of 2 or more performers. One may use material produced in the early weeks, or start fresh. Five to eight measures per week are expected, though some variation is predictable and allowable. A lack of production for more than one week in a row will be noted in the attendance log and reduce one's grade, however.

The last three classes will be devoted to playing and fine-tuning the final projects. The final project comprises both a performance and a completed score, with parts as appropriate for the composition. Neatly hand-copied manuscripts are acceptable, and computer notation is preferred for final projects. In order to help you reach this stage, and to improve your final performances, a draft of the final project is due in week eleven. The next two weeks will then allow refinements in the piece and in the notation of the score and parts, and the final score is due in week twelve.

Attendance is required at every class: everyone depends upon each other, and we simply cannot function well with absent class members. One absence for the entire semester will be excused. Every subsequent absence (with exception for real health or emergency issues) will take a letter grade off one's semester grade.

While some work on one's piece during class is acceptable, using class time to do one's weekly composing is not.

EVALUATION

The final grade will be determined as below:

Attendance: 30%

no more than one absence; each additional deducts 10%

Steadiness of work: 30%

gaps of more than a week in production reduce the total by 5%

[1/6 of 30%] per week

Completion of the final project: 40%

neatly copied manuscript due at next-to-last class meeting, performance during final week of classes

COURSE OUTLINE

The outline provided here is speculative, with the exception of the final project due date. We may take longer at any stage, or go more quickly through any stage.

Week 1	Introduction.
Week 2	Perform music you composed for your instrument/voice, describe capabilities of your instrument.
Week 3	Perform music composed for you by another performer, discuss difficulties, improvements to your composing and theirs.
Week 4	Perform music composed for you by another performer, discuss difficulties, improvements to your composing and theirs.
Weeks 5-7	Class members perform music you composed for 2 or more parts, discuss difficulties, improvements, possibilities.
Weeks 8-11	Perform new additions to final project in progress.
Weeks 10-13	Perform draft of final project, making improvements each week.
Exam-Jury Period	Class concert

Completed Scores for Final Projects due April 10, 2018

Final Concert TBA

ASSIGNMENTS (due date listed)

- 1/24:** Write a short piece or collection of ideas for yourself which will demonstrate the capabilities of your instrument or voice. Play the music in class. **Bring a handout** to distribute which describes your range, notation, and anything else of fundamental importance about your instrument or voice. Bring 2 or 3 selections of music for your instrument that you think demonstrate well its capabilities or highlights something you like to perform.
- 1/31:** Write a short piece or collection of ideas for someone else's instrument or voice.
- 2/7:** Write a short piece or collection of ideas for yet another instrument or voice.
- 2/14-2/28:** Write 5 to 8 measures for a group of 2 or more parts, deepening and extending the piece each successive week.
- 3/6-3/27:** Write music that will be your final project, adding something new each week, whether truly new or refined and improved from a previous version.
- 4/3:** Final project draft due.
- 4/10:** Completed manuscript of final project due.

Final Project:

The final project should consist of a piece of moderate duration, for two or more performers. We will have rehearsed the piece in class, and you may need to rehearse outside of class. Completion of the final project means it is performed on the class concert and that you have submitted a score of good quality (not necessarily using computer notation, though that is desirable) along with adequate parts (if deemed necessary).