

The Composer's Craft

or: "Experimental Music, Musical Experiment"

Introduction

This course explores the history of Western music from the composer's perspective, considering how innovations in musical styles, forms, and sounds reflect the historical and cultural conditions of the era in which composers create their works. This semester's focus is the relationship between scientific innovation and musical experimentalism. Topics include unusual tuning systems, alternative systems of consonance and dissonance, and the impact of modern scientific and technological discoveries on music composing throughout Western history. Students will apply these historical perspectives to their own hands-on creative work with old and new technologies. The course is designed for students with some background in music and technology who also have an interest in understanding how scientific discovery can inform artistic experimentation, and vice versa.

Our goal for this class is to get you to compose music with different technologies, without worrying if you're using those technologies "in the right way" or not. In this class, we will not focus on any particular music programming techniques or hardware skills; rather, we will try to teach you to use music technology in a more creative and fearless way. This creative fearlessness requires understanding technology from a historical perspective, and not simply a technical one. When we start using a music technology, the first question we tend to ask is: "how *should* it work?" Unfortunately, this question mires us in technical tutorials that defer the problem of making music. Understanding technology from the perspective of experimental composition doesn't mean learning to use technologies correctly; it means learning to see *various* creative resources offered by a technology, whether sanctioned by convention or not.

The more interesting question is this: how *can* a particular music technology work? *History* helps us answer this question by reminding us that technologies are less stable and predictable than they appear. In the first half of the class, we'll look at the history of sound technologies and experimental music from the mid-19th century to today, including the gramophone, the microphone, speakers, magnetic tape, analog circuits, digital samplers, etc. With this history and music as our guide, we'll compose short experimental works using technologies that are ubiquitous and cheap. In the second half of the class, we'll stretch further into the past to discuss three types of technologies that are so old and ubiquitous, we often forget they're technologies over which we have some creative control, and not simply "the way things are". These are *music notation*, *musical time*, and *musical pitch*.

Logistics

Instructors

Alex Ness and Yoni Niv

Class time and place

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:00–11:40 am, Arnhold Hall 55 W 13 613

Office Hours

By appointment. Grab us in class, or write to us at

- nessa@newschool.edu
- yonii.niv@gmail.com

Prerequisites

The desire to compose and willingness to perform. We do not presume that you have any traditional musical or technical skills. If you do, that's okay too.

Required items

Nothing. We will provide .pdf's of scores and readings, as well as audio files. These will all be available on the class Blackboard site. You may need to spend a small amount of money on electrical objects to mangle when we get to "Sound Circuits" and "Hardware Hacking". When we get to "Digital Sound", you will need free sound-editing software which we will explain how to download and use.

Documentation

In a traditional music composition and analysis course, you would be expected to produce *Western music notation* for your compositions. Experimental music, however, has challenged this privileged musical object of Western musical thought, by embracing alternative compositional media, such as:

- sound recordings;
- video recordings;
- graphic scores;
- circuit diagrams;
- verbal instructions for producing sound or listening to it;
- etc.

Once we're free from having to use traditional music notation to authorize our musical thinking, we take on the responsibility of documenting our work clearly and thoroughly, in order to share our work with others and leave a historical record of our music.

Documentation is an essential aspect of the composition and analysis assignments for this class. We expect every assignment to be thoroughly documented.

The score for Lachenmann's "Guero" is one example of what constitutes good documentation for a piece of music. It includes:

- a documentation of the musical idea
 - what the composer is trying to do, and what the musicians should listen for and think about when playing
- performance instructions
 - a notation system with an explanation of how that system works
 - descriptions of instrumental techniques
 - explanations of how the piece evolves through time
 - what's flexible and what isn't
- technical specifications
 - descriptions of the instruments themselves
 - setup instructions

Projects

Weekly projects

Composition

Our main priority is to get you composing. To that end, we will assign weekly, small-scale composition projects dealing with that week's topic. On Tuesdays, we'll set aside a good chunk-sized chunk of class time for composition presentations and discussions. Come to class prepared to share what you've done with your classmates!

There almost certainly won't be time for everyone to present every week, but we'll grade your projects whether you present or not.

Analysis

Our second priority is to get you analyzing unfamiliar music. Every week we will come up with a couple compositions for you to listen to; pick the one you're most interested in and create a short analysis. On Thursdays, come in prepared to lead a discussion about the composition you analyze; there will be ample class time for discussion.

Think of analysis as a creative rather than a passive exercise. The line between composition and analysis is much thinner than we tend to expect. A good analysis is not simply a description of what's happening musically, but a reflection on it, just as a good essay is not simply a summary of a subject, but an argument about it. Analysis should present a musical problem, and justify its analytic argument with examples from the music.

We'll collect the analyses on Thursday and grade them.

Readings

Our third priority is to get you reading exciting texts of various sorts. Musical practices are inseparable from critical writing practices; the reading assigned in this class address musical problems, which we encourage you to engage them through your composition and analysis projects.

Larger projects

Midterm

To conclude the first half of the course, you will have 2 weeks to come up with a medium-scale group composition. We will assign the groups of 3 to 4 students. After one week, you will present on your work in progress.

If you insist on duration, think of this as a meaty 3-minute piece.

Final

For the last six weeks or so, you will work on a large-scale composition, either individually or in a group of your choosing. We're trying to find a performance venue; detail to follow.

Grading

- Composition assignments: 60%
 - Preliminary compositions: 20%
 - Midterm: 10%
 - Final: 30%
- Analyses: 40%

Grading Scale

5. Excellent 4. Very good 3. Good 2. Poor 1. Very poor 0. Missing

Late assignments will be marked down one grade. We won't accept assignments more than a week late.

Attendance

- Students are expected to attend class regularly and promptly. Class begins at 10:00 am!
- 2 unexcused absences are allowed for the semester. The 3rd unexcused absence lowers the final grade one level (B+ to B, for example), the 4th absence lowers the final grade one letter (B+ to C+, for example), and the 5th absence results in an F for the course.

- Attendance is taken at the beginning of each class; 2 late arrivals count as 1 absence.
- The 2 unexcused absences should be reserved for a temporary illness that does not require a physician's visit or hospitalization, or similar extenuating circumstances.
- An absence due to illness requiring a physician's visit or hospitalization, or a family emergency, can be excused only with written documentation. Observance of a religious holiday qualifies as an excused absence.
- Students enrolling after the first class are responsible for all missed assignments.

Blackboard Coursepage

Course materials will be posted on our Blackboard coursepage, accessible with your Groupwise username/password at my.newschoo.edu (or blackboard.newschoo.edu). Check your New School email account regularly for class announcements.

Disabilities

In keeping with the University's policy of providing equal access for students with disabilities, any student requesting accommodations must first meet with Student Disability Services. Jason Luchs or a designee from that office will meet with students requesting accommodations and related services, and if appropriate, provide an Academic Adjustment Notice for the student to provide to his or her instructors. The instructor is required to review the letter with the student and discuss the accommodations, provided the student brings the letter to the attention of the instructor. This letter is necessary in order for classroom accommodations to be provided. Student Disability Services is located at 79 5th Ave., 5th floor; the phone number is (212) 229-5626. Students and faculty are expected to review the Student Disability Services webpage. The webpage can be found at <http://www.newschoo.edu/studentaffairs/disability/> and the office is available to answer any questions or concerns.

Schedule

Part 1. Up through spring break.

Week	Date	Topics	Readings	Analysis assignments	Composition assignments
1	1/25	Early recording technologies	Kittler: <i>Gramophone, Film, Typewriter</i> , "Preface", "Introduction" and "Gramophone" through page 59 [PDF page 51]	John Cage: "Imaginary Landscape no. 1" (due 2/3)	An act of music-technological sabotage (due 2/1)
	1/27	Compositional sabotage of technology			

2	2/1	Magnetic tape, <i>musique concrète</i> , and immersive listening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Russolo: "Art of Noises" 2. Schaeffer: "Acousmatics" 3. Varese: "Liberation of Sound" 4. Finish Kittler, "Gramophone" 	<p>Pick one:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [Musique concrète example] 2. Lachenmann: "Guero" <p>(due 2/10)</p>	A composition with acousmatic and instrumental scores (due 2/8)
	2/3	Sound production: knowing the instrument	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Matmos interview 2. Lachenmann interview 		
3	2/8	Sound circuits (1): Building an oscillator	<p>Excerpts from Collins, <i>Hardware Hacking</i>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "The World's Simplest Oscillator", 64–71 2. "More Oscillators", 75–78 <p>[Also: Stockhausen]</p>	<p>Pick one:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oliveros: "Bye Bye Butterfly" 2. Stockhausen: "Studie II" <p>(due 2/17)</p>	A composition with an oscillator, an amplifier, or both (due 2/15)
	2/10	Sound circuits (2): Building an amplifier	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collins: "A Little Power Amplifier", 108–109 		
4	2/15	Digital sound (1): Analog approximations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [Yasunao Tone excerpt] 	<p>Pick one:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ryoji Ikeda: "Transmission" from <i>Dataphonics</i> 2. [Nancarrow Study 21] <p>(due 2/24)</p>	A glitch composition (due 2/22)
	2/17	The digital as such			
5	2/22	Hardware hacking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collins: "Starting", "Listening", "Toucing" 	<p>Max Neuhaus: "Times Square" [public [installation]]</p> <p>(due 3/3)</p>	Group compositions (due 3/8)

			2. Collins: "Live Electronic Music", in the <i>Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music</i>		
	2/24				
6	3/1	Sound art and sound installations	1. Licht: <i>Sound Art</i> , "What is Sound Art?" (~60 pp. w/ pix) 2. Rancière: "Metamorphosis of the Muses"		
	3/3	Installations con'd			
7	3/8	Group composition performances. Also, improvisation and technology in NYC			
	3/10	Improvisation continued; live performance, we hope			
8	3/15	Spring break			
	3/17				

Part 2. Through the end of the semester.

Week	Date	Topics	Readings	Analysis assignments	Composition assignments
9	3/22	Music writing. 1. The birth of notation	Kittler: "Number and Numeral"		
	3/24	2. Standardization and attempts at reform	Rousseau: "Plan Concerning New Signs for Music"		
10	3/29	3. Rediscovery of		Choose one:	Start final

		flexibility: classic graphic scores		1. Morton Feldman: "Projections" 2. Earle Brown: "Folio" (due 4/7)	composition projects. Presentations of works-in- progress every Tuesday; projects due 5/10
	3/31	4. Musical representation today			
11	4/5	Musical timing: 1. Timing before the note	[Expect readings to be posted in the next couple weeks.]	[Expect analysis assignments soon.]	
	4/7	2. Mensural notation			
12	4/12	3. Time-keeping instruments			
	4/14	4. The radicalization of musical time			
13	4/19	Musical pitch: 1. The science of harmonics	[Ptolemy excerpts]		
	4/21	2. Microtonal music in the Renaissance	[Vicentino excerpts]		
14	4/26	3. Timbre in the 19th c.	[Helmholtz excerpts]		
	4/28	4. Frequency in a digital age	Gann: "The Outer Edge of Consonance"		
15	5/3	History in experimental music			
	5/5	"			
16	5/10	Final project presentations			
	5/12	"			

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