

College of Staten Island, CUNY

Department of Performing and Creative Arts

Syllabus

MUS 473: Senior Project, Composition



Instructor: Scott Miller
Class Meetings: Online — Weekly lessons on Zoom
Optional in-person lessons and workshops
Office Hours: by appointment
Email: Scott.Miller@csi.cuny.edu

Course Prerequisites: Senior standing; any 200-level or above TALA course; MUS 204, MUS 224, MUS 226, MUS 244. **Corequisites:** MUS 303, MUS 322, MUS 323, MUS 363

Course Description: 1 hour; 1 credit. Weekly lessons focus on building basic composition techniques in various media, while working towards completion of a final project, written for the students' colleagues. A variety of styles of music are explored, guided by the interests of the student. Writing assignments include working towards long-term goals on composition projects and shorter, technique-focused exercises; listening and analytical assignments will also be given to learn strategies and models for our own music. We will also discuss practical matters like building a routine, generating original musical ideas, collaborating with performers, and other relevant matters.

Course Objectives:

- Explore composition methods including routines, how to start a new piece, and collaboration
- Learn techniques for composing with melodies, harmonies, rhythms, timbres, textures, and other parameters at front of mind
- Practice basic skills like harmonizing a melody, writing accompaniment, etc.
- Learn basic skills for collaborating with performers and creators in other media, including film
- Expand listening horizons by studying music by composers and artists working in a variety of styles, using various tools.
- Discover basics of instrumentation and orchestration
- Incorporate skills from music theory and ear training courses into compositions
- Learn strategies for composing compelling musical forms
- Explore “model composition” as a pedagogic tool
- Discuss strategies for finding your “voice” as a composer.

Assessment:

- 50% attendance and preparation. Come to every lesson prepared. Compose every week! Listen every week!
- 50% final project: satisfactory completion of a notated composition, from conception to recording!

Sample weekly assignment: A generic technique-focused assignment valuable for developing musical ideas. “Motivic Development”: Find new versions of the theme itself by changing one element at a time. To get started think about these operations:

- New rhythms; new meter
- Augment (stretch) and diminish intervals
- Change mode (M, m, etc.)
- Inversion (pitches)
- Retrograde (play backwards)
- Embellish by adding notes; also, “re-simplify” by stripping back an embellished version to reveal something new.
- Register: how does the theme change when you change octaves?



- Key: changing keys isn't necessarily a 'transformation' (it's a transposition!) but think about the effect of writing the theme in two or more different keys consecutively, or combining it with an accompaniment in a *different* key, etc.
- Combine all of the above

Final composition project

The scope and specifics of the project will be designed collaboratively with students' goals in mind.

Sample final composition project

- The composition must be written for a performer (ideally *not* for themselves), and for an instrument other than the composer's primary instrument. (If you are a piano major, no piano pieces!)
 - It is recommended that the student approach a peer in the CSI performance program within the first weeks of the semester to ask if they are interested in giving the world premiere of your new composition at the end of the semester.
 - The commitment from your colleague will be (1) meet with the composer to introduce their instrument, discuss idiomatic writing, and performance techniques; (2) commit to at least one workshop/reading session of a draft of the piece; and (3) to rehearse and perform (most likely remotely, i.e. make a recording of) your composition, which will be 2-5 minutes long.
- The composition must include notated elements (you must produce a score and/or parts, as appropriate), though there are *no restrictions on style*.
- The composition should be 2 to 5 minutes in duration. (Longer pieces may be considered as long as they are not cumbersome for the performer).
- The composition should be for solo instrument (or voice)
 - if writing for voice, be sure to find a text *yesterday!* Also note, any text you set must be in public domain, or you must have permissions to use it (if you did not write it yourself, of course).
 - further collaborations are possible. For example, you may wish to set poetry by a friend (with their express permission!); or score a short scene in a film; or write a piece that is inspired by visual art. These are all possible, and the logistics must be worked out by the student.