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MUCP 183-983: Applied Music Composition--A Course Benchmark Portfolio

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MUCP
183-983:
Applied Music Composition

A Course Benchmark Portfolio

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Abstract

ABSTRACT

MUCP 183-983, Applied Music Composition, is the core of the music composition course curriculum for students at all levels, from freshman to doctoral candidate. Like all applied lesson environments, it is a one-on-one, individualized study that principally involves the instructor giving students feedback on their musical works-in-progress. This time-honored paradigm for teaching composition has produced brilliant artists, but is rife with pitfalls and traps that can tarnish a student’s growth: composition pedagogues can coerce students into writing music like their teachers, or can prescribe a curriculum that makes composition accessible only to students who have already played classical music for years.

As the school of music diversifies, and students enroll whose musical experiences may be more varied than ever, how can composition lessons best serve them? How do we encourage student growth no matter what their musical aspirations, and how do we assess growth without letting our personal preferences color our judgments? Is there a way to “universalize” a composition curriculum so all students—from the doctoral student with an emerging compositional career to the brand new freshman whose only musical experiences have been making beats on their laptop—can grow within it? This portfolio sets out to answer these questions through examination of the Applied Composition curriculum. It introduces the structure and rationale for the course design, alongside current issues within the field of composition pedagogy. It examines strategies for maximizing and assessing student growth, and then applies those strategies to student work to demonstrate how they might be useful to both composition teachers and students.

Keywords: music, music composition, creativity, undergraduate, graduate
# Table of Contents

Portfolio Abstract .................................................................................................................. i

I. Course Design ..................................................................................................................... 1
   i. Course Overview
   ii. Student Overview
   iii. Course Context, Challenges, and Portfolio Rationale
   iv. Course Goals and Objectives

II. Teaching Methods/Course Materials/Course Activities ................................................. 5
   i. Course Structure and Core Course Activities
   ii. Non-Compositional Course Activities

III. Analysis of Outcomes ...................................................................................................... 7
   i. Criteria for Analysis
   ii. Analysis of Student Learning

IV. Planned Changes to the Course ....................................................................................... 16

V. Summary and Assessment ............................................................................................... 17

VI. Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... 18

VII. Appendices ...................................................................................................................... 19
    A. Syllabus
    B. Student work samples
COURSE DESIGN

Course Overview
MUCP 183-983, Applied Music Composition, is the one-on-one training course for student composers at all levels, from freshman to doctoral candidate. The students at all levels are seeking degrees in music composition; principally, they seek a BM, an MM, or a DMA. Additional students may occasionally elect MUCP 183-983 as a non-major.

Students in the undergraduate program take eight semesters of Applied Composition, 183-487; graduate students take at least three semesters of 983 (four for the doctoral degree), but often elect to take additional semesters while writing a dissertation or thesis composition. The progress through the Applied Composition curriculum is cumulative, with each course level being a prerequisite for the level immediately following it.

Students in MUCP 183-983 receive one private 50-minute meeting (a "lesson") with the instructor each week for the entire semester. The enrollment is generally capped at twelve students per semester across all levels, meaning that the instructor can expect roughly twelve student contact hours per week. Over the course of the semester, the students complete one or more compositions; these can be of varying length and composed for a wide variety of performing forces. The student usually develops their semester project(s) in consultation with the instructor; but (especially for graduate students) other considerations, such as professional obligations to complete a certain piece, may have an impact. The principal guideline for students at all levels is that they must complete at least one instructor-approved piece of music each semester.

Because of our department’s educational philosophy, students are not required to enter at the 183 level with any music literacy: they need not be well-versed on a classical instrument, and they need not have the fluent ability to read written music (this fluency is required of students at the 283 level and above). All students are admitted to the degree program on the basis of a musical portfolio which they submit, and so all students enrolled in 183-983 exhibit creativity, curiosity, and the innate ability to use music expressively. However, the range of additional expertise is immense. Our program includes ABD candidates—many of whom have become accomplished performers on an orchestral instrument as well—working on evening-length projects, such as a ballet or opera; and freshmen who have never studied classical music or an acoustic instrument, but have used software to create interesting, expressive music, and would like to apply that skill to acoustic instruments.

Student Overview
In the term presented in this portfolio (Spring 2018), a total of ten students were enrolled in applied composition lessons, each of whom received an hour weekly of individual instruction. The ten consisted of four graduate students and six undergraduate students. All six undergraduates have declared composition as their primary area of musical study (their “instrument”); however, only four are composition majors, while two are studying composition as a component of a music education major. Of the graduate students, two are pursuing a graduate degree in composition, one is a graduate student in jazz bass, and the remaining a graduate student in orchestral conducting. Primary instruments for these individuals include clarinet, percussion, piano, euphonium, and voice.

These ten students represent characteristically diverse musical backgrounds. While several come from experiences typical of the American public school music program — prior training in band, choir, and/or orchestra — several do not. One undergraduate identified as a folk singer/songwriter before choosing to study composition, while another’s primary musical
experience is in composing musical interludes for productions at her hometown’s community theatre. The graduate student in jazz bass was trained in Germany and comes to the composition studio with advanced study in free improvisation. Several of these ten students are accomplished electronic musicians, with impressive achievements in industry-standard software such as Cubase and Logic.

Course Context, Challenges, and Rationale

Fluid Structure and Objectives

The musical diversity described above is standard for a program like ours, and our composition faculty encourages it. I believe that welcoming students of all musical backgrounds into serious musical study is beneficial for everyone, including their fellow students.

However, this same diversity presents challenges for the pedagogue. Students almost always enroll in multiple semesters of 183-983, usually with the intent of developing skills in line with their career goals. These goals vary intensely among enrolled students, and so therefore does their desired area of focus: while some students may wish to focus on traditional ensembles like orchestra and string quartet, many want to further explore technology, ensembles traditionally associated with rock or jazz, or niche ensembles like show choir.

For reasons too complex to adequately address here, it would be problematic to prescribe a "one-size-fits-all" set of ensembles/projects which students must undertake; and such a chauvinist approach to composition might in fact reduce a student’s ability to find musical opportunities post-graduation. So, the exact structural objectives of the course—what music students actually write as part of their participation in Applied Composition—are fluid and individually tailored, requiring the pedagogue to define learning outcomes for the course that can be applied to a multitude of projects, genres, and student interests.

What’s “Good?”

The most general overarching objective for all enrollees in 183-983, regardless of their existing skill, is for them to become better composers. This in and of itself is controversial, though: music is inherently subjective, and the field is locked in a decades-old argument about what makes some compositions 'better' than others. The concept of what makes a composer ‘better’ is equally subjective, and it is vulnerable to the same levels of scrutiny by members of the discipline. As the music world changes, both on the professional side and the academic side, so do the professional opportunities and avenues for composers; and so the requisite skill set for a recent graduate of a composition program is in near constant evolution, presenting a moving target for curriculum design that responsibly prepares students for work in the music industry.

Instructor Bias in Teaching

Perhaps as a result of this subjectivity and instability, the pedagogy of applied composition has been virtually unexamined at most institutions around the country. Historically, it heavily emphasizes a master-apprentice model, whereby a student works closely with a teacher who offers them feedback on the weekly progress of their composition (the reader may recognize this as the core structural design of MUCP 183-983). Often the barrier to entry into study is high, requiring extensive knowledge of music theory and skill performing on a classical instrument before the first lesson. The feedback the student receives may be heavily informed by the instructor's aesthetic biases, or by his/her views on what “works” to beget success in the professional music world.

This is not to say, of course, that there aren't pedagogues of applied composition around the country that teach at a high level — there are many, at institutions of all types and sizes. As I write this document, I’m reminded of the tremendous teachers with whom I had the privilege to study,
and how their tutelage shaped my own approach to music and to pedagogy. The above criticism is only to point out the relative lack of critical examination that has been given to the applied composition curriculum and aims, and to highlight how easily the paradigm can deviate from its pedagogical aim of creating ‘better’ composers. Student improvement can easily take second priority to admitting students already predisposed to self-improvement. In the worst-case scenario, applied study of composition may focus not on student improvement, but on reframing a student’s creative voice to fit the sensibilities of the instructor.

**Rationale for the Portfolio**

These considerations are primarily what led me to choose this course for portfolio creation. As an ongoing course — taught every semester to a relatively stable student population — it represents a major part of my teaching responsibilities. My hope is that by developing a portfolio and thinking critically about the objectives of applied composition training at all levels, I can create a course structure that will better serve students at all levels. I also hope to use this portfolio as an opportunity to develop teaching activities and assessments that will help composition pedagogues to see student improvement more effectively and objectively, and that will give students clearer feedback and strategies to pursue their own artistic growth.

**Course Goals and Objectives**

The widest goal of participation in MUCP 183-983 is, as earlier discussed, for students to improve as composers. Individual students’ programs of study and assessment criteria will vary based on their career goals. As composition training involves the acquisition of an applied skill and cultivation of a portfolio demonstrating that skill, students’ pedagogical needs are closely tied to the genre and/or discipline in which they hope to work. However, there are several overarching objectives for every student’s growth, regardless of which corner of the music world they hope to occupy.

**Objective 1: Awareness and Use of Musical Structure**

A primary goal for all students is that they enhance their understanding of how music can be used to create narrative, tension, and release over time. This involves thoughtful inquiry into the overarching structure of each composition, as well as critical examination of how its musical materials interrelate to one another. For many novice composers, who are used to writing music “as it flows,” this enhanced awareness of structural concerns represents an important step in their artistic development; for more experienced composers, the objective is to further refine their skill with crafting compositional structure to aesthetic ends. A pedagogical concept used to talk about this skill is a student’s compositional “intention,” or their ability to use music to elicit a desired emotional reaction in a listener.

**Objective 2: Demonstration of Idiomatic Understanding**

Equally as important an objective for all students is the development of their ability to write music idiomatic to their chosen instruments and performing forces. This involves developing a thorough knowledge of each instrument’s strength and weaknesses, including its physical capabilities and expressive characteristics across the range of the instrument. Additionally, it involves knowledge of acoustic principles, and often knowledge of industry-standard software used to create musical textures. While each student’s priorities in this area will depend on their compositional interests, the development of some facet of this knowledge through composition training is a critical goal for all students.
Objective 3: Varied Musical Creation Strategies

My third goal for students in applied composition is that they will develop a series of strategies for generating musical material. This is the “creative” part of composition: the ability to generate unique melodies, harmonies, and rhythms that can be used as the basis for a piece of music. While this skill is related to the other course objectives, it cannot be developed as thoroughly by just focusing on concerns of structure and practicality; the actual construction of interesting musical ideas requires its own pedagogy and practice.

Objective 4: Self-Assessment Skills

The fourth, and perhaps most significant, objective of composition lessons is to endow the student with the ability to self-critique and provide insight into their own decisions’ efficacy. This could also be understood as helping the student grow their skill with compositional intention: growing their ability to identify how their music could better serve their expressive desires. In addition to the ostensible rationale for this objective — that this skill will allow students to continue to improve as composers following their education — this course objective is an important safeguard against the pitfall of the instructor “teaching their taste.” If the objective of applied lessons is not to help the student write “better music” (which, as we have seen, is a term rife with problems) but to help them approach their work with the ability to better understand and diagnose its shortcomings, style and preference become largely irrelevant and discussion can be shifted instead to the process of examining and revising music.

Additional Objectives

These four objectives are the primary foci of applied lessons in composition, and this portfolio will be used primarily to examine student growth in those areas. However, an important secondary goal that I also plan to discuss is each student’s verbal and written communication. In just about any professional context, it is vital that composers be able to explain their compositional choices using spoken and written word. Successfully writing and speaking about one’s music is vital to securing grants, being competitive for academic jobs, and for simply helping audience members understand the music they hear. This objective is not central to the day-to-day curriculum of the course, but its importance to professional success drives me to include it in this portfolio as something worthy of discussion, pedagogy, and assessment.

It is important to note that MUCP 183-983, like most applied music lessons, is cumulative; the expectation is that students in the composition major will continue in subsequent terms at subsequent levels for their entire education. Therefore, there are really two sets of objectives for each student: the short-term goals of improvement in each area over the course of the semester, and the long-term benchmarks for student mastery at the end of their degree program.

A concurrent challenge to the questions already posed in this teaching portfolio is the development of these long-term benchmarks in ways that can be applicable to all of our composition students. With what skills, for example, should every undergraduate composition major finish his/her degree? Does it matter that some of our students will never seek to write for a professional orchestra? Or that some will be singularly focused on writing music for video games? Should technology and/or skill with composing for large classical ensembles be required for both of these types of student? It it perhaps enough to simply expect students to cultivate clear expressive desires for their music — and to expect them to grow in the four areas listed above — or does a useful composition degree mean that students must graduate with a fixed set of core competencies, no matter what their career goals may be? As part of developing this portfolio, I hope to come closer to being able to answer these questions.
TEACHING METHODS/COURSE MATERIALS/COURSE ACTIVITIES

Course Structure and Activities
As was briefly discussed in the previous section, all levels of Applied Composition are taught in a one-on-one setting, with meetings occurring once per week for each student. The traditional paradigm is for a student to consult with the instructor near the beginning of the semester to choose a project which they would like to compose over the course of the term: some examples of student projects this term include a string quartet, a work for wind ensemble, and a score for a short film. Each week, the student brings in their progress on the project at hand, and the lesson takes the form of detailed discussion of the student’s work, in which the instructor offers the student suggestions for improvement and engages them in critical thinking about the composition’s direction.

This paradigm is flexible based on several factors. First and foremost, the number of projects a student undertakes in a given term may depend on a student’s creative speed, the scope and ambition of the projects undertaken, and other factors; some students may compose a single major work over the course of the year (as is common for dissertations and Master’s theses), while others may complete a composition — or several compositions — in the space of a single term. Additionally, depending on a student’s individual needs and developmental stage, the composition lesson may include topics designed to expand the student’s technical knowledge of concepts such as music theory, electronic music, or instrumentation.¹

Project Requirements
For all students, the exact musical language and performing force for which they compose is open-ended. My only requirement for the project they choose is that it involve the use of some expressive element they have never utilized before. Most commonly, this means writing for a performing force they’ve never used; but it can also mean utilizing an unfamiliar musical language or compositional strategy, such as twelve-tone music, chance procedures, etc.

Live Performance Requirement
When the project is complete, all students present their composition publicly on our new music series.² The composition students are required to recruit their own performers and manage the rehearsal schedule in preparation for this live performance. They are also required to introduce their piece from the stage at the concert.

This final performance is required of all students, and is an absolutely essential part of the educational process. I see this activity as a confluence of all of the course’s major objectives, in addition to helping the student exercise some other vital skills. In hearing a live performance of their work, the student composer is made to confront the expressive choices they have made with regard to structure and pacing. Giving them the chance to “feel the room” as other audience members react to their musical choices is important in developing their mastery of compositional

¹ The music curriculum includes courses designed to teach these topics; however, students’ degree programs may not allow room to take some of these topics as electives, and often the student’s expressive ambitions extend beyond what they may learn in an introductory survey of a given concept. This is especially true in the realm of music technology: while most students have a passing familiarity with the tools available for electronic music, upper-level use of professional music software like Logic and Max/MSP requires dedicated exploration and study that is not represented in our curriculum. Therefore, for student composers interested in these softwares, the composition lesson becomes a de facto lab for learning them (in addition to the objectives outlined in this memo).

² The Flyover New Music Series, our concert series of student compositions, features live performances evenly spaced out through the year, so this performance doesn’t necessarily occur at the end of the academic term. Rather, the calendar is designed to allow students to fulfill the public presentation requirement at whichever point best coincides with the conclusion of their organic compositional process.
intention. Additionally (and equally importantly), by preparing their work for live performance, students are made to watch performers learn their music, and in the process the composers learn the extent to which their choices are idiomatic. This can include the “nuts and bolts” of idiomatic writing, such as ensuring that their clarinet part only includes notes that are physically playable on the instrument; but it also allows for more complex observations.

For instance, a given passage may be physically playable on a violin but, because it utilizes difficult fingerings and no open strings, may be awkward for the performer even after some practice. The awkwardness may affect the performance and work against the expressive desires of the composer. While training in instrumentation may help the student avoid some traps like this, there is no better teacher than live experience and contact with an expert (the performer).

The live performance also gives students an opportunity to write program notes and introduce their work verbally, honing their mastery of both forms of communication. Finally, it allows them hands-on experience with project management as their recruit musicians, manage rehearsal schedules, and execute the final performance of the piece. These management and planning skills are indispensable for working artists of all types.

Non-Compositional Course Activities

Composition Journals

The primary objective of Applied Composition is to train the student’s ability to connect their expressive desires with their musical choices. That is, students in MUP 183-983 are learning to make musical choices in their works that will elicit in their listener a specific desired emotional response. This is at odds with some problematic elements of composition pedagogy, most notably the danger of offering feedback based on the instructor’s aesthetic preferences and not the student’s expressive desires. By teaching the instructor’s “voice” as the desired outcome (even unintentionally), the focus is taken off the student’s own expressive aspirations for their music, and thus the development of their intentional skill is neglected.

While awareness of the instructor’s own biases can help mitigate the tendency to act on them in the studio, it is also vital to have students thoughtfully and critically examine their own creative choices (both on small and large scales) and evaluate whether they are in line with their expressive desires for their music. To this end, each student keeps a “composition journal” in which they write prose reflecting on their work in progress. Students are required to write one 1-2-page entry approximately every two weeks, and turn in their entries each month. In their journal entries, students are asked to reflect on the compositional choices they have made so far in the project, and to critically examine those choices. They are asked to name elements of the piece that they think work well, and those that they are concerned will be less effective. Students also reflect on the direction of the composition — including the overall form and structure — and whether their original designs for the composition are still effective given the progress of the work thus far.

Precompositional Exercises

Because the ability to manage tension and release over time is central to successful composition, it is important that student composers think about form and structure; the overall “story” of the composition. This is not usually an intuitive skill for a student composer, as most novice composers conceive of their projects in “left-to-right” terms, making a series of choices at the

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3 In the last ten years, students have increasingly relied on computer playback within music notation programs to give them instant feedback about their compositional choices; while this can be a valuable tool for some pedagogical objectives, it cannot accurately represent these sorts of complex instrumentation challenges, making the live performance an irreplaceable part of the educational process.
beginning and then following those choices intuitively. This generally produces music that may be effective in moments but lacks a compelling structure capable of holding a listener’s attention.

So to help students practice their skills at designing compositional forms, a series of “precompositional” exercises are given. These precompositions are non-musical expressions of the narrative journey a composition will take; depending on the student’s strengths, they can be written prose which outlines a composition, or drawings or graphs which represent it visually. The student is not generally allowed to use any music notation as part of these exercises, in order to keep the focus on the structure as a whole. Completion of these precompositions prior to starting true composing gives the student a framework for understanding how their musical materials will function in the context of the overall narrative. As will become evident, precompositional exercises are also important tools for the instructor in assessing understanding of form and structure, because they can illustrate the student’s intention for his/her expressive design and guide critique of the resultant composition according to its stated goals.

**Masterwork Study and Analysis**

Because a central part of learning composition is studying the masterworks of other composers, each student is assigned weekly listening and score study assignments relevant to their current composition project. These weekly assignments serve as important object lessons, illustrating for the student an effective use of a particular technique or language they are hoping to master. More importantly, weekly exposure to new musical ideas helps the student to become more versatile and observant listeners, a skill universally recognized as central to success in composition. Without the ability to understand and contextualize a wide breadth of music in multiple genres, it is extremely difficult for a composer to contextualize their own artistic statement, making the pursuit of true artistic originality or relevance all but impossible.

These weekly assignments help students develop a wide knowledge of repertoire across genres. In order to complement that with the ability to meaningfully analyze a composition and its constituent materials, students are required to conduct one thorough written analysis of a composition chosen in consultation with them. As much as possible, the composition to be analyzed and the analysis tactic are tailored to the current composition project, in the same way that the student’s weekly listening and study assignments are. The student is assigned this analysis at a point in the semester which varies for each student, dependent upon their progress and individual interests. Once the piece and analysis strategy are chosen, the student has one week to complete the written analysis, which they bring to their lesson the following week.

**ANALYSIS OF OUTCOMES**

**Criteria for Analysis**

It bears restating that students’ learning and growth in MUCP 183-983 cannot be fairly evaluated solely on the basis of quality of the music, or how “good” their composition is. There are myriad reasons for this strategy being ineffectual; most prominently are 1) the inherently subjective nature of measuring quality in music, and 2) the fact that students’ creative processes may not neatly line up with semester’s end, and therefore they may complete the semester without a cumulative artistic project which can be submitted for assessment.

Instead, I analyze student growth according to more targeted criteria based on the course’s objectives:

1. Has the student demonstrated awareness of large-scale musical structure, and the ability to use structure in shaping musical tension and release?
2. Has the student demonstrated understanding of each instrument/software program’s capabilities and idiomatic limitations?
3. Is the student utilizing a variety of strategies for creating musical material?
4. Has the student grown in their ability to analyze and critique their own musical choices, as well as their ability to assess whether those choices are maximally effective toward their expressive goals?

Additionally:
- Has the student demonstrated skills in analyzing music which can help them self-improve in these four core competencies?
- Has the student demonstrated the ability to communicate, both written and verbally, about their musical and artistic choices?

Because of the qualitative nature of these criteria—and the fact that applied curricula are taught and tailored individually to each student—the analysis of student work to answer the above questions is essentially qualitative in nature. There is indeed some evidence that quantitative assessment strategies can be valuable for student composers, but because most of those strategies involve rigid assessment frameworks (which themselves are inherently subjective and open to instructor bias), I have chosen not to utilize them in this benchmark portfolio. In future iterations of this course I hope to develop quantitative data strategies that rely more heavily on student self-assessment, and to use that data in analyzing and documenting student learning.

Analysis of Student Learning

Objective 1: Awareness and Use of Musical Structure

Although it was not a strict requirement of the syllabus (for reasons previously discussed), all students enrolled in MUCP 183-983 this semester completed at least one new composition. This allowed for thorough discussion in lessons with each student of the compositional process, including extensive examination and assessment of compositional structure. Several students created detailed precompositional exercises, including prose descriptions and graphic outlines of their compositions. These largely took place before any music for the composition had been

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written. As is shown below, these precompositions provide an important tool for assessing student’s understanding of form and structure concepts in their own compositions.

The undergraduate whose work is shown in Figure 4.1, hereafter referred to as Undergraduate A, developed textural ideas about the music he wished to write — ranging from "light and bubbly" to "slow, reflective, and ambient" — and assigned them each a color. He then used those colors to organize the form of his composition for wind ensemble, thus giving himself the opportunity to make sure the material remained balanced within the composition. The resulting composition (a reading performance of which can be found as an appendix) largely follows the outline imagined here, but with some changes based on the composer’s aesthetic sense and instincts as he began composing. That fluidity is to be expected, and the connection between the precompositional diagram and the composition remains visible.
Another undergraduate (Undergraduate B), whose precompositional graph is shown in Figure 4.2, composed a piece for solo flute based on the archetypes of the Campbellian “Hero’s Journey,” as depicted in an Indiana Jones-style epic movie. Because his expressive intentions were so closely tied to a preexisting narrative design, he began by graphically summarizing the narrative of the story he was trying to tell. Within that framework he began including ideas about textures (“fast, modal,” “twisting chromaticism”) and thematic ideas (“Waltz theme”, “Idol motif”) which would express elements of the narrative. The student also began highlighting connections between different parts of the narrative journey which he hoped to parallel musically with recurring themes or textures; these connections are visible in the graph’s dotted lines and arrows. The resulting composition retains these programmatic connections; and as the student intended, recurring musical ideas are used to create connections between different parts of the narrative.

Figure 4.3 shows a graduate student’s precomposition in progress for an unfinished orchestral work. The graph depicts the composition left to right, with annotations describing the
harmonic area and musical material in each section. Underneath the graph, the student also includes prose descriptions of the music in some sections.

While this student completed other compositions (and precompositions) during the semester, I opted to include this graph in this portfolio to illustrate the student's mastery of critical concepts. Although this graph is unfinished, it is extremely detailed in its descriptions of the music. In addition to showing a very strong intention for the music's texture and effect, the precomposition shows the student thinking critically not only about thematic relationships, but harmonic balance and evolution of his musical materials. Several motifs (musical themes) are used, but the composer also indicates his intent to move to a "more minimalistic cell structure" and, in doing so, compose music based on a "fragmented" version of his theme rather than the full theme. This graph shows the level of detail with which the student is conceiving of musical structure before composing; and so, even though the piece depicted is unfinished, the instructor can see evidence of student mastery of this important objective.

**Objective 2: Demonstration of Idiomatic Understanding**

Wherever possible, students planned performances of their new compositions and presented them on our Flyover New Music Series, as required by the syllabus. Students were only excused from this requirement in the event that their work was being performed by a University-recognized ensemble elsewhere in the School of Music, such as a large ensemble concert or degree recital.
Accordingly, all students were able to work with performers and to hear rehearsals and premiere performances of their new compositions. These rehearsals and performances are the principal chance to assess the student’s idiomatic understanding of their performing force. During rehearsals, the performer can give verbal feedback to the student; in performance the instructor can see moments in which the performer struggles due to needlessly challenging or carelessly-crafted music.

The video shown in Fig. 4.5 is of the Flyover premiere of Undergraduate A’s new work for steelpan. This student had never written for steelpan before, and thus had to learn the instrument’s idiomatic capabilities from scratch. He did so through a series of interviews with his performer, and close contact with him during the composition process. The end result is, as can be seen, difficult but quite accessible by the performer; the challenges to the performer result from the complexity of the music, rather than the composer’s disregard for the instrument’s natural capabilities.

Figure 4.6 links to a recording of a piece that may be considered less idiomatic for its performers. This piece, a composition for euphonium and tuba by another undergraduate student, is difficult for its performers in several ways that create unnecessary challenges. The tuba is asked to move quickly in its lowest register, a challenge on the instrument that may be remedied by moving that musical material to a different register (or writing the part for a different instrument). Near the middle of the piece (ca. 1’02” on the recording), the euphonium is asked to play an Eb5, an
extremely high note that presents challenges to most non-professional players. Both of these challenges audibly affect the performance: the tuba stumbles on fast notes in the lowest register, and intonation suffers greatly on the highest note for the euphonium.

I had discussed with this composer (Undergraduate C) the demands he was making of his performers, but he opted not to make any changes to the final score. Because the student’s final performance suffered due to avoidable idiomatic problems within the score, his evaluation on the mastery of the second objective was not as high as that of Undergraduate A.

**Objective 3: Varied Musical Creation Strategies**

Students’ fulfillment of this objective is largely assessed on a weekly basis, when they have their private lesson. Based on their stated artistic goals and the creation strategies I observe them using, I assign them other strategies or modes of creation to consider using. These alternative strategies may not make their way into the final composition for a variety of practical or aesthetic reasons; as such, the final version of the student’s composition cannot be fairly used as a tool for assessing a student’s mastery of this objective.

More valuable for this task is the student’s early work on their composition, a part of the process referred to in the studio as “sketching.” The sketching process involves experimenting with various modes of musical creation in a context-free environment; that is, composing musical ideas outside of the framework of a structure-driven composition. Sketching provides the student with a sandbox for trying new, possibly uncomfortable compositional strategies. The sketches also provide the instructor with a guide for understanding the student’s strengths and limitations in terms of their creation strategies.

![Fig. 4.7: Graduate B, sketches](image-url)
Figure 4.7 shows one page of a graduate student’s sketches for a song for soprano and piano. The sketch page enables the reader to understand what strategies this composer is using in the earliest stages of the compositional process, when access to a variety of modes of creation is most important.

Near the center of the page, the student can be seen to be freely composing melodic ideas without any clear system or approach to guide his creative choices. This is an important mode of creation, albeit insufficient to demonstrate mastery of the objective; however, the sketch page also contains a great deal of other evidence. Near the bottom of the page, the student can be seen to use a neo-Riemannian “cycle,” a semi-algorithmic approach to composition which generates novel and unexpected harmonic motions. The top of the page shows a synthetic musical scale and a collection of chords that the student is deriving from it.

In total, there are three different modes of musical creation evinced on this page of sketches, each suggesting a different aesthetic and philosophical approach to creation. While this student might be advised in future terms to continue exploring and utilizing new strategies for composition, this sketch page can be considered evidence that the student is capable of utilizing a variety of creative strategies to generate musical ideas, and therefore has fulfilled the goals of this criterion.

Objective 4: Demonstration of Self-Assessment Skills

The introduction of Composition Journals as a central, recurring component of Applied Composition was largely in order to create opportunities for students to intentionally practice self-assessment. By asking students to critically examine their work during the compositional process as well as at the end of it, the hope was that students would develop skills in identifying and addressing shortcomings in their own work, including the emotional resilience to persevere through the compositional process while still acknowledging those shortcomings.

Accordingly, the primary tool for assessing students’ growth in this area is examination of their monthly submitted composition journals. All students submitted a total of eight composition journals over the course of the term, two for each month (January, February, March, April). The syllabus specified that students should complete one journal entry approximately every two weeks; however, in order to accommodate for variations in students’ creative process, only one due date was set for each month, with the expectation that students would submit all entries for the past month at that time.

An unforeseen consequence of this was that students often completed both entries near the end of the month, or submitted their entries undated so the progression of time between entries was unclear. However, because all students submitted journals each month, the cumulative journals could be examined for growth in this area. In particular, the journals were qualitatively assessed on their level of insight and the depth of their critique, especially in contrast to “self-celebrating” journals that focused only on the student’s favored aspects of their composition.

Here is an excerpt from Undergraduate A’s second January composition journal:

In my current project for electronics, I am just pushing through the “bottleneck” phase of the process. Personally, this is usually occurs about 3/4ths of the way through a piece. At this point, you’ve gotten to know all the compositional materials you’re working with, the instruments are more familiar, and you can fairly quickly generate new material similar to what you have already written. However, with all that information gathered during the writing process, initial large-scale concepts and ideas seem to make less and less sense. This is the the existential crisis of the piece, the bottleneck.
While the writing here is vulnerable and attempting insight into the writing process, the student’s comments and observations are quite general and unspecific, and do not pertain directly to the project. Throughout the term, the student and I had several discussions about the creative process and about strategies for self-assessment. Here is an excerpt from the same undergraduate’s April journal, at which time he was writing a piece for wind ensemble:

One of the things that I am deeply concerned with while writing a piece is audience engagement... I attempt to envision when the general audience’s focus will be fading in and out and structure the piece somewhat accordingly... [when writing for wind ensemble], there are many more things that can simultaneously be happening, many more elements that can constantly be changing...with each new instrument you add, there are many more ways that an idea can now be manipulated. Sometimes with solo instruments, I would write an idea, develop it in one fashion until that feels tired, and then move on to a different idea. With a large ensemble, doing this does not do justice to the entire idea. Each instrument provides an entirely new character and color to an idea, and when considered with all the different pairings and groups of instruments, a single idea can be stretched for quite some time. This is not to say that every possibility must be explored every time while developing an idea, but in the future when I write for large ensemble, or even perhaps in general, I want to do a better job of considering (to the best of my ability) all the options and then pick and choose the best possible ones for that situation.

In this later journal, the student is tackling more specific concepts germane to the compositional process, such as “audience engagement” and the difficulties of orchestrating a musical idea for a large ensemble. He cites specific techniques and is frank about the perceived effectiveness of his musical choices. It is evident that this student has grown in his ability to critically examine elements of the music which he is composing.

This student can be compared to an undergraduate colleague (Undergraduate D), who submitted the journal entries below while working on a piece for chorus. From January:

I want the piece to have more emotional highs and lows, and I see the next section of the piece breaking more into that feel, rather than the reigned in feeling of the section that I do have written. I do like that the piece sets itself down a little to calm the listener before breaking more into a “storm” of emotion...My greatest challenge so far is the relationship between consonance and dissonance. I would always take dissonance over consonance, but sometimes I need to step back and realize that that consonance is so very necessary.

From April:

The experience of writing a piece for Chamber Singers this semester was quite fulfilling. I really appreciated the opportunity, and I am really quite happy with how the performances and recording of the piece turned out. Some of the harmonic vocabulary was a bit more complicated for the vocalists initially. I think I underestimated by ear in this context, so it is something I will look out for when writing pieces in the future. I tend to be able to read music very well, and while it can make for interesting music, it can also scare people from performing my piece... For the future, I think I will have more directors and conductors look at pieces I am writing for an ensemble.

This student’s level of insight and awareness remained largely consistent from her first entry in January to her last entry in April. In both instances, her observations are largely vague and overarching. The student does not critique specific instances or choices in her piece, nor does she discuss specific elements of the compositional process, beyond the general concepts of dissonance...
and harmony. There is little evidence here that this student’s ability to self-assess has grown over the course of the semester.

It should be noted that, like many students, Undergraduate D is returning for continued study in MUCP 183-983 in the fall term; thus, I treat the assessment of her growth in this objective (and all other objectives) not only as the basis for her grade, but as evidence of areas on which to concentrate when we resume lessons next term. This has perhaps emerged as the greatest value of defining clear objectives and the modes to assess them: growth and student assignments can be individually tailored and targeted to a student’s areas of weakness in subsequent terms, giving them a more valuable (and perhaps more rigorous) experience in Applied Composition.

**Additional Objectives**

The completion of “score study” — in-depth, critical examination of musical masterworks — has been a core part of the study of composition for centuries. It is generally accepted that this study helps a student composer to understand good musical practice and introduces them to artistic ideas that may expand their creativity and curiosity. All students in MUCP 183-983 completed at least one written study of a composition as part of their participation in the course; like all elements of the course, the exact composition and analysis techniques were individually tailored to the student’s needs, interests, and compositional aspirations. The submitted analyses ranged from intervallic analysis of a two-part invention by J.S. Bach to a prose summary of a song cycle by American composer George Crumb.

Additionally, all students who presented their compositions on a Flyover New Music Series concert accompanied the performance with introductory remarks for the audience, as well as written (2-3 paragraph) program notes outlining the inspiration for their composition. While there is no active assessment of either the student’s introductory remarks or their written program notes (see Planned Changes), this course component allows students to continually develop their written and verbal communication skills as they develop their compositional skills.

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**PLANNED CHANGES TO THE COURSE**

I am confident that all components of the course as it is currently structured are valuable in helping students develop a comprehensive and applicable skill set as composers, regardless of their degree program. I intend to retain all of the core components of the course design, including the newly-added Composition Journal and written analysis assignments. The modifications I intend to make to this course are largely an effort to better assess student learning in all of the course’s objectives.

The Composition Journal has, as I hoped, provided valuable insight into each student’s creative process and self-assessment abilities. However, the relatively loose structure—initially designed to give students flexibility in writing their journal entries—became a liability: on several occasions, students waited until the last minute to complete their entries, sometimes dating them to the last two days of the month. This substantially weakens the journals’ value for both the students and the instructor. Going forward I intend to schedule journal submission deadlines every two weeks, which will naturally spread out students’ entries so a more complete picture emerges of their formative growth.

Additionally, I would like to create more opportunities for students to intentionally develop their skills in verbal and written communication, as well as opportunities to assess those skills. The Composition Journal serves as an important writing assignment; however, because the program notes are “public facing” I prioritize creating assignments that help the student develop those. My
intention is to pair students for blind peer review of each other’s program notes; doing so allows students to practice being critical readers and audience members, while ensuring that each student gets meaningful feedback on the effectiveness of their writing.

To help students become more comfortable with verbal communication I hope to give them an structured opportunity to practice their introductory remarks prior to any premiere performance. The curriculum for composition majors includes a weekly 50-minute departmental seminar, generally used to discuss career-related topics and feature guest speakers; this represents an ideal opportunity for students to practice speaking in front of an audience. Students in the “audience” will have the opportunity to offer feedback to the speaker, and I will also provide the student with a written assessment and further discussion in their weekly lesson.

An overarching goal going forward is to consider other assessment methods that may be used to give students more targeted and actionable feedback, and ones that may be more illustrative of student growth to external reviewers. While I have shied away from framework-based assessment methods out of concerns for their inherent bias and inflexibility, I would like to augment my current assessment methods with some sort of quantitative measure. I also believe consensual assessment models, whereby student work is assessed by a group of knowledgeable external faculty, hold potential for addressing my concerns about the current assessment strategies of this course. However, the structural difficulties of consensual assessment are considerable given the already sizable workloads of my colleagues in the School of Music.

As readers review this portfolio and its findings, I welcome feedback on assessment strategies in which you may see value for this course, especially those which offer clear actionable or quantitative findings for students, reviewers, and instructors.

**SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT**

Participating in the creation of this benchmark portfolio gave me the opportunity to engage in serious discussions of the aims and objectives of Applied Composition. It was particularly valuable to define the learning outcomes of this course, which are too often critically unexamined in the music community. Having a clearer picture of my objectives for students—and how to assess those objectives in the curriculum—continues to shape my pedagogy on every level, from my day-to-day interactions with students to structural and curricular concerns.

At present, I believe that MUCP 183-983 helps students work toward clearly defined learning outcomes, and offers clear methods for assessing student growth toward those outcomes. As I continue to refine the outcomes and teaching strategies embedded within the course, I hope to integrate more quantitative, consensual, and/or student-driven assessment methods. These methods are not sought to supplant subjective instructor feedback, but to augment it, and hopefully provide both students and reviewers with clearer pictures of student composers’ growth and trajectory going forward.

As the School of Music’s population grows, I expect it to become more diverse, bringing in student composers from even more varied musical backgrounds. This portfolio has helped me to begin working towards a universally applicable strategy for teaching composition, and I am excited to continue building upon the structure which it helped me develop. My ultimate goal is to create a curriculum and a pedagogical approach that will help students to develop the skills they need to succeed professionally and artistically, whatever that success may look like to them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would especially like to thank the ten students in MUCP 183-983 Spring 2018, who graciously allowed me to use their music, their sketches, and their journals in this portfolio; and who were always patient and open-minded as we tried new ways of thinking about music:

Josh Spaulding
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Ian Whillock
Rubén Dario Gómez
Michael Kraft
Jake Consbruck
Andrew Barber

This project wouldn’t have been possible without you. Thanks.
MUCP 183-983: Applied Composition
Spring 2018

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Office hours/location: As posted, WMB 217
Section: 002
Credits: 2-6

Class Time: Individually scheduled, T 3:30pm-4:20pm for composers’ seminar

Course Prerequisites
MUCP 183/4: Instructor permission; meet with professor prior to registration
MUCP 283/4: MUCP 184
MUCP 383/4: MUCP 284
MUCP 483/4: MUCP 384
MUCP 983: Graduate standing in composition or instructor approval

Required Materials
Staff paper (available for free at blanksheetmusic.net)
Professional-quality music notation program: Finale, Sibelius, Dorico, etc.
Audio editing software: ProTools, Logic, Reaper, etc. (for electronic composition as needed)
Readings and score study as prescribed by instructor

Suggested Materials
Alder, Samuel. The Study of Orchestration.
Stone, Kurt. Music Notation in the Twentieth Century.

Course Objectives
Students in applied composition will develop their skills in composing music for various performing forces and venues. Through establishment of short- and long-term compositional goals and completion of composition projects, students will further their mastery of harmony, form, orchestration, text-setting, and other elements of composition. Students will critically examine relevant works from various music genres, and in doing so will enhance their understanding of their own compositions in historical context. Through lessons and development of the Flyover New Music concert series, students will discuss and master skills relevant to their career aspirations, including application for prizes/grants/academic appointments, marketing and self-promotion, and issues of copyright and ownership. Through composers’ seminar, students will exchange ideas and creative philosophies in pursuit of self-discovery and strengthened musical community. These enhanced capacities will help students to better use composition to realize and communicate their own artistic personalities to diverse audiences.

Grading and Lesson Activities
Grading will be based on three primary categories: attendance, participation, and productivity. Students are guaranteed a C in lessons if they meet the productivity expectations agreed upon by the student and instructor at the beginning of the term; high-quality compositional work and a positive, professional attitude may raise the student’s grade. Students will receive an A for fulfilling all productivity expectations; zero unexcused absences at lessons, seminars, and Flyover concerts; on-time submission of all written assignments (including Composition Journals and score studies); timely completion of each week’s listening assignments; and maintaining an excellent attitude and demeanor during all composition department events.

Attendance
Composition pedagogy is a process of dialogue and collaboration; as such, attendance at weekly lessons is of paramount importance. Attendance at all lessons is mandatory. Students will receive zero credit for unexcused absences from
Lessons; if you anticipate absence from a lesson, 36 hours of notice is required for excusal. This requirement will be waived only if an official documentation (doctor’s note, court note, etc.) is provided. Each unexcused absence from lessons will result in a deduction of 3% from the student’s final grade.

Lessons cancelled by the instructor will be made up prior to the end of the semester; instructor will consult with the student to determine a mutually convenient time. If you choose to decline a makeup lesson, you must submit your decision via email no later than the next lesson or the end of the semester, whichever comes first. Lessons missed by the student may be made up at the professor’s discretion and availability. While lessons missed due to calendar holidays, UNL Inclement Weather Events, or official GKSoM events (e.g., Audition Days) will be made up as is possible and convenient, a makeup lesson for lessons missed due to these events is not guaranteed. Students will not be penalized for lessons cancelled for these reasons.

Students who arrive more than 5 minutes after the beginning of the lesson without notifying the instructor forfeit their right to a lesson that week and may receive an absence for the lesson. If you anticipate traffic, personal, or other delays, let me know via email or text as soon as possible.

**Participation**

Attendance is required at all weekly composers’ seminar meetings and Flyover New Music concerts. Seminar attendance is subject to the same guidelines as lesson attendance. Absence from a Flyover New Music concert without prior instructor approval will result in deduction of a full letter grade. Students are expected to fulfill all requirements listed below for composition seminars and FNM concerts, and generally contribute positively to the GKSoM musical community. Assignments and/or projects may be assigned for composition lessons or seminar; students will be expected to adhere to these requirements and deadlines.

**Productivity**

Composition can only be learned through composing. As composers grow, they will develop work habits appropriate to their productivity and temperament; however, a guideline (and an expectation for new composers) is 2 hours per day, 5 days per week. While this number is flexible, all composers should plan on meeting the productivity targets listed below:

*Undergraduate:* 1-2 new pieces for various forces each semester
*Graduate:* 2-3 pieces (or one large piece) for various forces each semester

Students will work with their primary instructor to establish a multi-year plan at the start of their education. These plans are subject to change but shall serve as guidelines for productivity and artistic exploration throughout the degree. In constructing their plan, students are encouraged and expected to undertake projects in a diverse array of performing forces, styles, and languages, including works involving electronics and post-tonal musical languages.

Students who arrive at their lessons with no new work to discuss may forfeit their lesson for that week.

**Composition Journals (new this term)**

The Composition Journal will allow you an opportunity to reflect on your composition and on the writing process while you’re in the midst of it. Each student will write 2 entries per month for the duration of their participation in lessons. Each entry should be 3-4 paragraphs long, and consist of a reflection on the composition you’re working on. What’s the current state of the piece? Where do you see the piece going? What have been the greatest challenges of the writing process so far? What are you the most proud of about the music you’ve written, and what do you think needs the most revision?

These entries can be done at any time (although one every two weeks is recommended). The previous month’s entries will be due on the 1st of the month, and can be uploaded via Canvas.

**Score Study/Critical Listening**

Active study of great music is essential to growth and development as a composer. Most weeks, the student will be given a list of pieces to listen to during the following week. “Listening” involves active, engaged listening and critical examination of some elements of the composition. You will be asked to share your observations and insights at the next lesson. Virtually all recordings will be available online (Naxos, Spotify, YouTube, etc.). Every student is different, so you will be given score study assignments on an individual basis. New this term: one score study/critical listening assignment will involve written analysis or reflective statements. Deadlines for these assignments will be chosen in consultation with the student.
Flyover New Music
The Flyover New Music Series is UNL’s resident new music series, totally organized and curated by UNL composition students and faculty. Fall 2017 marks the debut of the Flyover New Music Series.

There are five Flyover New Music concerts during the year: two in the fall, and three in the spring. All composers are expected to present new works at two or more Flyover New Music concerts during the academic year, not during the semester. We also expect to present a “Flyover satellite” concert at a venue somewhere off campus during the spring term.

All works to be presented on the concert must be approved by the instructor prior to the beginning of rehearsals.

All composers are expected to attend every Flyover New Music concert, as well as any FNMS outreach events. Exceptions will only be given in the event of family/medical emergency, or conflict with another GKSOM event. All other conflicts will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and the composition faculty reserve the right not to excuse a student from concert attendance. Absence from a Flyover New Music concert without prior instructor approval will result in deduction of a full letter grade.

Candidates for the doctoral degree who are in the final phase of dissertation work my be excused from presenting at Flyover New Music, contingent on instructor permission. Students may also have this requirement waived by presenting pieces on non-Flyover performances, such as recitals, large ensemble concerts, etc.; these exemptions will be given on an individual basis.

The responsibilities for student presenters at Flyover are as follows:

- Secure performers and electronic/technical equipment as needed, and organize rehearsals.
- Submit program notes by the deadline provided for each concert; these should include the piece’s title, names of performers, and notes which enhance the listener's experience by helping them better understand the piece and its inception. These are due via email to the Flyover GTA no later than three weeks before the date of the Flyover concert in question.
  - Briefly introduce the piece onstage at the concert.

The Flyover New Music responsibilities for all composers are as follows:

- Be in attendance at all Flyover New Music concerts and events.
- Participate in all composition studio showcase performances at Flyover, as directed by the department head.
- Fulfill volunteer duties as directed by the Flyover GTA; these may include (but are not limited to) concert stagehand work, acting as an “ambassador” at concert receptions, posting/distributing concert flyers, etc. Members of the Flyover Volunteer Committee (FVC) are exempt from this requirement for the entire term of their service.

Composition Seminars
Composition seminars serve a variety of purposes for a composition studio, logistic and otherwise, but their principal function is to allow us to share our music and artistic philosophies with a community of thoughtful and supportive composers. Seminar will take various forms throughout the semester, including (but not limited to) group discussions and in-progress composition presentations; presentations by composition faculty and/or guest speakers on a variety of issues; critical examinations of masterworks by composers from a variety of genres and historical periods; and mock-interview settings for graduate students to practice their teaching demonstration, “job talk,” masterclass, or other professional presentation. Graduate students will have additional requirements related to seminar presentations; these will be assigned in seminar.

Because seminar is about developing and strengthening community within the composition studio, attendance is required from both graduate and undergraduate students. Attendance will be taken at every seminar meeting. A complete schedule for the term will be provided at or shortly after the first meeting.

Important Dates
Thursday, October 5 - Flyover I, 7:30pm
Wednesday, November 29 - Flyover II, 7:30pm
Friday, January 26 - Flyover III, 7:30pm
Tuesday, February 27 - Flyover IV, 7:30pm
Wednesday, April 18 - Flyover V, 7:30pm
Ian Whillock (Junior), *Horizons*, precompositional sketch
Tuesday January 23rd

I am trying to start. I would try to make a story about the first three years of my youngest son, Emanuel. There are some particular characteristics in his personality that I can describe in a piece. I love instruments in bass clef, (Euphonium and cello are probably my favorite ones) but I think none of them will satisfy the expectations for that particular piece. I thing the tenor sax have more of the ingredients that I ma looking for; it has a pretty good range, it is capable to play beautiful lines, bong dynamic range, very clear articulations and also has the aggressiveness that I need in an specific section. Tonality (harmonic progressions) and rhythms are part of my comfortable tools. So I need to think different.

I have been playing with the name E M A N U E L, and I assigned some pitches to these letters, some of them are repeated, and finally I came out with five pitches C, C#, E, Ab, B. I am trying to connect my composition process with the content I am taking from the post-tonal theory class. I have the impression that it can work. There are certain Emanuel’s behaviors that I want to include. The fact that he enjoys been alone for hours (and he is good with that) is something that can help me in one section. His frustration when he is not capable to express in words what he want or he does not want is another part of his personality that can give contrast to the piece. I would like to start from there.

Ruben Gómez (DMA), composition journal entry

Caption: Ian Whillock, Horizons, live reading session
Andrew Barber (sophomore), written analysis (J.S. Bach, 2-part invention in f minor)

Andrew Barber, *Ramona*, first page
Ruben Gómez, *El Mundo de Emanuel*, Flyover New Music premiere

Andrew Barber, *Ramona* (Movement I), Flyover New Music premiere
Jacob Consbruck (junior), Archetype for solo flute, first page.
Jacob Consbruck, Archetype, precompositional sketch.