

HUMA 2103: Introduction to Music Composition

DHSS, Division of Humanities, HKUST – Fall 2025

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Lectures:	Wednesdays 9:00–10:50 AM
Location:	Shaw 103
Tutorials:	Wednesdays 12:00–12:50, 1:00–1:50, 2:00–2:50 PM
Location:	Shaw 103

Course description

Studying the elements of classical composition is akin to learning an instrument: while understanding theoretical concepts is important, the crucial task is to practice their application, hands-on and systematically.

This class is extremely labor-intensive. The students will explore ways to mold their own musical language and ideas through composition exercises, analysis of repertoire, study of music theory, and improvisation. Learning correct notation, production of performance materials, and working with performers will also be important aspects of the course.

There is no final examination for this course. As the final project, the students' chamber music compositions will be performed in a public concert by a hired ensemble of professional musicians, supplemented in some cases by student performers. A preliminary composition exercise is also due in lieu of a midterm examination, and will be performed in class.

Intended learning outcomes

On successful completion of the course, you will have

- developed your overall creative thinking;
- gained the ability to express yourself through writing music;
- a deeper appreciation and understanding of music, regardless of style;
- stronger musicianship skills; and
- a wider and practical understanding of music theory.

Prerequisites

While you do not need to have extensive musical background to sign up for the course, you should have basic music reading skills (such as acquired in HUMA 2104) and the ability to play an instrument. We will conduct an advisory placement exam during the first class session.

Course requirements

1. Most of what you learn will be assimilated in class—attendance, therefore, is crucial. In tutorials, we go through students' work together. These sessions are as important as the lectures. Towards the end of the semester, tutorials will be replaced with one-on-one composition lessons. *You are expected to participate in every class session, tutorial, and one-on-one meeting.* Be on time: twice late will count as once absent.

2. You must also participate in the final concert and be in charge of the rehearsals of your own work. The concert and dress rehearsal will be on the evening of Wednesday, December 17, 2025; the rehearsals will take place Tuesday, December 16, 2025. You need to reserve the entire day on both days. *If you are unable to commit to these dates, you cannot enroll in this course.*

3. Midterm project: composition of a duet or solo work, with a duration of at least one minute. Depending on the nature of your project, this can also be the first draft of your final composition project; this will be decided on a case-by-case basis.

4. Final project: a work for two or more players, duration at least two minutes.

5. We will hire professional performers for the final concert. However, if you need additional players, both your plan and the outside player(s) need to be pre-approved. Take this into consideration when deciding what instruments to write for. If you are an experienced performer yourself, you are encouraged (but not obligated) to play in your own work.

6. For the midterm composition, we will not have a hired ensemble. We will help you find players by providing names and contact information of musicians who have volunteered to participate in the past—ultimately, making sure you have the players for your piece and scheduling rehearsals *will be your responsibility*.

Term paper and concert

HKUST's flagship arts initiative, the Cosmopolis Festival, is curated to add value to our music courses. Attendance in two Cosmopolis Festival concerts relevant to your music class, as well as two educational events of your choice, are mandatory.

The two recitals for HUMA 2104 are:

- October 24, 7:30 PM: Concert by the Pavel Haas Quartet (Czechia)
- November 8, 7:30 PM: Filippo Gorini (Italy) solo piano recital

Attendance is free, but you will need to register a seat. We will provide a registration link closer to the concert and HKUST students get preferential treatment for the first few days. The full Cosmopolis Festival season will be announced at the beginning of September. More information, including about educational events, will be released on the festival website: <https://cosmopolisfestival.hkust.edu.hk/>

Your term paper will be an analytical writing assignment, based on music you hear at the events. The length is a minimum 350 words, which works out to around 1.5 pages in Times New Roman 12-point font, double spaced. More details will be given in class. You will also be provided a link to a video of the concert to assist with writing the paper (assuming MTPC will edit and publish it in due course).

Grading

Attendance and participation	15%
Portfolio of exercises/homework	15%
Term paper	15%
End-of-semester quiz	10%
Midterm project	20%
Final project	25%

HUMA 2103: Tentative class schedule, Fall 2025

Week 1: September 3

- Introduction to class
- Thinking and listening like a composer: interaction of parameters; musical form

Week 2: September 10

- More on musical form: large-scale vs. small scale form
- Basics of melodic writing: crafting a line; melodic procedures

Week 3: September 17

- More on melodic writing: motivic work
- Contrapuntal thinking: combining two melodies
- Preparation for concert report: guidelines, writing good prose; concert etiquette

Week 4: September 24

- More on counterpoint: harmonic (vertical) vs. melodic (horizontal) dimensions
- Instrument demos begin; exact dates TBD based on performers' availability

Week 5: October 1

Public holiday, no class

Week 6: October 8

- Harmonic thinking; non-tonal harmonies
- Acoustics, human physiology, time: overtone series; consonance vs. dissonance
- Orchestration: overview; writing for string instruments
- Instrument demonstrations begin (subject to availability of players)

Week 7: October 15

- *Everyone presents their initial plan for midterm composition project*
- More on harmonic work and non-tonal counterpoint
- Producing scores and parts

Week 8: October 22

*MIDTERM IN-CLASS CONCERT: PERFORMANCE OF
STUDENT COMPOSITIONS!*

Audience welcome to attend!

Week 9: October 29

Public holiday, no class

Week 10: November 5

- Modal and artificial scales (non-major/minor scales)
- Pitch collections as both melodic and harmonic material
- More on instrumentation: woodwind instruments

Week 11: November 12

- Rhythmic techniques: momentum; form; polyrhythms and triplets
- More in-class instrument demonstrations

- *Everyone presents their initial plan for a final project composition*

Week 12: November 19

- *Full first drafts of final project due and presented in class!*
- No tutorials: One-on-one sessions and rehearsals, with me and Galison Lau (IA).

Week 13: November 26

- Rehearsals and one-on-one sessions
- *End of semester quiz: terminology, analytical listening*

Rehearsals: Tuesday, December 16, 2025. For now, reserve the day. Location TBD.

Dress rehearsal and concert: Wednesday, December 17, 2025; Shaw Auditorium.