

HUMA 2104: Music Theory I — Introduction to Tonal Music

SHSS, Division of Humanities, HKUST — Fall 2025

Instructor:	Steven SNOWDEN - ssnowden@ust.hk
Office:	TBD
Office hours:	TBD
Instructional Assistants:	TBD
Office:	TBD
Lectures:	Tuesday/Thursday 9:00 – 9:50 AM
Location:	Shaw Auditorium, Rm. 103
Tutorials:	Tuesday 11:00 – 11:50 AM; 12:00 – 12:50 PM; 1:00 – 1:50 PM; 2:00 – 2:50 PM

Location: Shaw 103

Course description

Music Theory I is an introduction to the basics of Western music theory with an emphasis on analytical listening and rudimentary composition. Writing skills taught in the course include notation; operating with keys and scales; identifying and constructing intervals and chords; and basic harmonic analysis. The course has a rigorous ear-training component which will be mostly practiced in tutorials. This will involve performing (by singing, clapping, talking) and transcribing music (rhythms, melodies, harmonies). The course culminates in a final project in which students compose a simple piano piece. This project will happen in clearly guided steps throughout the semester.

A broader objective of the course is to acquire listening skills that may be applied to various types of music. Students will develop an understanding of how different parameters (melody, harmony, rhythm, and so on) interact to create music. Examples used in class will be drawn mostly, but not exclusively, from Western classical repertoire. Although prior musical training will be helpful, there are no prerequisites for the course.

This is a very labor-intensive course: Be prepared to invest a significant amount of time and energy each week!

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

On successful completion of the course, you will have

- the ability to listen to music analytically, with an awareness of parameters such as meter, texture, modulation, instrumentation, and form;
- learned the rudiments of reading and writing music, as well as basic musicianship skills;
- developed a deeper appreciation and understanding of music, regardless of style, and of Western classical music in particular; and
- prepared yourself to pursue more advanced studies in music (including HUMA3104: Music Theory II).

Attendance and participation are crucial for assimilating the skills needed for reading music and developing your ear. We will be taking attendance at the beginning of the class; arriving late twice will be considered equivalent of being absent once.

If you cannot commit to attending every class session and tutorial, you should not take this course. Also note, you will be required to attend two concerts (listed below) and two educational events (TBA).

Term paper—Pavel Haas Quartet or Filippo Gorini concerts

Your term paper will be an analytic writing assignment, based on a composition of your choice that you hear at the concert. You can choose between the Pavel Haas Quartet on October 24 or Pianist Filippo Gorini on November 8. Attendance is free, but you will need to register a seat. The length of your paper 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.

Study materials

No textbook is required for this class. You will be given PDF handouts and assignments, and directed to various online resources for reference, review, and practice. For taking notes, you will need music staff paper, which you can print out from a file available on Canvas.

Homework

Each homework assignment PDF needs to be printed out by the student, completed in pencil, scanned or photographed, and uploaded on Canvas by the given deadline, usually before the next class session. Alternatively, the homework can be done on a tablet computer or other device that allows marking up PDFs. We do not accept late homework unless there are extenuating circumstances; even so, missing the deadline will lower your homework grade. If we have already gone through assigned material in detail in the class after the deadline, it cannot be turned in late regardless of the reasons. Under extenuating circumstances, you may be assigned a make-up homework exercise.

Composition exercise

This course will provide you an opportunity to try your hands on writing a short, simple composition, following the rules of traditional tonal music, as your final project. This is the most challenging component of HUMA 2104. You don't need to worry about your project being a flawless work of art—the purpose is to give you insights into the craft composition by trying it out yourself, and learning music theory through “reverse engineering”. This will be done gradually over the course of the semester, with ample opportunity for revisions at every stage of the process.

Examinations

The midterm will cover the material of the first half of the course and the final exam will cover mostly the material of the second half, with some material from the first. Exams may not be made up unless you have a verifiable illness or emergency. You must notify us in advance if you must miss an exam.

Grading

Final Exam	30%
Midterm	15%
Homework	15%
Final Project	15%
Concert report	15%
Attendance/participation	10%

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Tentative class schedule — Spring 2025

LECTURE:

TOPIC:

Week 1

Tue, Sep 2 – Lec 1

Introduction to the course; musical perception: music and time, overtone series

Thu, Sep 4 – Lec 2

Topic 1. Rhythmic notation; note and rest durations; meter; bar lines; tempo; dotted and tied rhythms; simple meter

Week 2

Tue, Sep 9 – Lec 3

Topic 1. Tuplets; compound meters; pick-up bars; upbeats and downbeats

Thu, Sep 11 – Lec 4

Topic 2. Pitch notation: staves and the grand staff, clefs; accidentals, enharmonics; diatonic and chromatic half steps and whole steps

Week 2 tutorials: Reading rhythms; simple rhythm dictations; recognizing meter

Week 3

Tue, Sep 16 – Lec 5

Topics 3 & 4. Introducing rhythm composition assignment; introducing keys and scales

Thu, Sep 18 – Lec 6

Topic 4. Circle of fifths and keys, placement of accidentals

Week 3: tutorials: More rhythm work, including reading short parallel period phrases; simple singing exercises on half steps and whole steps, major scales

Week 4

Tue, Sep 23 – Lec 7

Topic 4. Devices for determining keys; circle of fifths in minor; minor scale forms (natural, harmonic, melodic); relative and parallel keys

Thu, Sep 25 – Lec 8

Topics 3 & 5. Discussion on students' rhythm composition assignments; introducing intervals

Week 4 tutorials: Ear training with major and minor scales

Week 5

Tue, Sep 30 – Lec 9

Topic 5. Intervals: numbers and qualities

Thu, Oct 2 – Lec 10

Topic 6. Introducing major-key melody composition assignment; motives and themes; phrase structure

Week 5 tutorials: Singing simple parallel period phrases in major; creating, identifying, and singing intervals, both harmonic and melodic

Week 6

Tue, Oct 7

No class: The day following the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival

Thu, Oct 9 – Lec 11

Topic 6. More on melodic writing in major

Week 7

Tue, Oct 14 – Lec 12

Topic 9. Introducing triads and harmony

Week 6 tutorials: Creating, identifying, and singing triads, both harmonic and melodic

Thu, Oct 16 – Lec 13

Topics 7 & 8. Introducing minor-key melody composition assignment; application of minor scales; analytic listening: texture, meter, and tonality

Week 8

Tue, Oct 21 – Lec 14

Topic 9. Seventh chords; inversions of chords and figured bass

Week 7 tutorials: More singing on the melodic minor scale

Thu, Oct 23 – Lec 15

Topics 6 & 11. Discussion on students' phrases in major key; guidelines for concert report/term paper

Week 9

Tue, Oct 28 – Lec 16

MID-TERM EXAMINATION

Thu, Oct 30 – Lec 17

Topic 10. Harmonic analysis in major; ear training with seventh chords

Week 10

Tue, Nov 4 – Lec 18

Topic 10. Introducing cadences; harmony and form

Week 9 tutorials: Creating, identifying, and singing seventh chords, both harmonic and melodic; cadence identification

Thu, Nov 6 – Lec 19

Topic 10. More on harmonic analysis; analyzing examples from repertoire

Week 11

Tue, Nov 11 – Lec 20

Topics 11 & 12. Introducing composition exercise (final project); more on term paper

Week 11 tutorials: Ear training on cadences and other harmonic progressions

Thur, Nov 13 – Lec 21

Topic 12. Working on sample final project together

Week 12

Tue, Nov 18 – Lec 22

Topics 9 & 12. Discussion on students' phrases in minor key; more work on sample final project: voice leading

Thu Nov 20 – Lec 23

Topic 12. More work on sample final project: voice leading and texture; analyzing music examples from repertoire

Week 13

Tue, Nov 25 – Lec 24

More analysis of music from repertoire

Thu, Nov 27 – Lec 25

Wrapping up; review for final examination