

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Division of Humanities

Course Syllabus – 2026 Fall

Course Title: Understanding Music in Context (HUMA1109)

No. of Credits: 3 credits

Prerequisites: No prior experience/knowledge in music is required

Course Instructor: Dr. Oliver Lo (盧思彥博士), Visiting Scholar, HKUST (2026 Fall)

DMA & MM (Eastman); AdvDip (HKAPA); HigherDip (HKPolyU)

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Course Description:

This introductory course examines the interrelationship between music and various facets of society. It focuses on how music influences our lives/society and vice versa; how scientists use technology to understand music; and a business model based on a music organization.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs):

In successfully completing this course, students should be able to

1. Explain the roles of music in influencing society and people's lives by applying concepts, theories, and approaches of various disciplines
2. Describe the use of science and technology in understanding music
3. Critically reflect on the impact of music on everyday life and their own lives.

Assessment:

Intended Learning Outcomes	Measured by		
	Components	Points	Method of Assessment
- Explain the roles of music in influencing society and people's lives by applying concepts, theories, and approaches of various disciplines - Describe the use of science and technology in understanding music	Final Exam (in person)	25pts	Mostly MC questions with some short questions
	Final Exam Pretest (online)	10pts	MC and Matching questions
	Midterm (in person)	20pts	MC questions
	Midterm Pretest (online)	5pts	MC questions
	Two-Minute Paper	20pts	At the end of some classes, class segments, or discussions, the students will be asked to write short responses to key questions. Each Two-Minute Paper is worth 2%. Twelve Two-Minute Papers will be offered, but only the top 10 scores will be used.
Critically reflect on the impact of music on everyday life and their own lives	Concert Attendance and a Reflective Journal	20pts	The student will attend an assigned concert on campus or off campus and will write a reflective journal; prompts will be provided. The Reflective Journal will encourage the students to reflect upon the impact of music on the lives of others and their own.

NO make-up exam will be offered. If you miss the in-person midterm, 18% (out of 20%) of the total score will be transferred to the final exam (i.e., the final exam will be worth 43%).

Teaching Approach:

Teaching and Learning Activities	Course Learning Outcomes Addressed
Lecture, video viewing, and case discussion	Lecture: The lectures will address several basic approaches and concepts of the study of music by using other means (Ex., using technology to understand structural communication in music; Schopenhauer's philosophical view about music; Meyer's theory of expectation) Video Viewing/Artist Sharing Session and Case Discussion: Through viewing documentary films about famous classical musicians, the students will see how music impacts their lives and how their lives and performances impact society. Sharing sessions/Discussions with guest artists will be arranged; students will learn how music impacts artists' lives. We will also study the "Orpheus Process", a business model based on the management model of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra.
Attending live musical performance(s) and a Reflective Journal	Concert Attendance: By attending live performances, students will understand the impact of music on the community. Reflective Journal: The Reflective Journal will encourage the students to reflect upon the impact of music on the lives of others and their own.
Two-Minute Paper	Apart from the benefits of improving attendance rate and encouraging students to be more attentive during lectures/Discussions, the 2-minute papers serve as an effective tool for reinforcing interaction between the instructor and students <u>Two-Minute Paper</u> I) During some classes, class segments, or discussions, the students will be asked to write a short response to key questions. II) Sample key questions: A. <u>Graded question:</u> 1. Name two important concepts examined in today's lecture. 2. The term "XXXXX" is used to describe: B. <u>Non-graded question:</u> 1. What was the most important or interesting thing you learned in today's lecture/discussions? 2. What concept was the most difficult for you to understand? 3. What examples did I use today that helped you the most/the least? 4. What could I do to present today's material more effectively? III) Each Two-Minute Paper is worth 2%. Thirteen (13) Two-Minute Papers will be offered, but only the top ten (10) scores will be used.

Course Outline:

Week	Topics	Content
1	Music and YOU	A reflection of the student's current view about music
2	Basic Elements of Music	"Nuts and Bolts" of music elements
3	Basic Elements of Music	"Nuts and Bolts" of music elements
4	Meaning of Music	In-Class experiment: Listening to a piece of music, and see whether the student can describe the emotional quality of it and various views from philosophers
5	Meaning of Music	Music and Science
6	Meaning of Music	Music and the Human emotions
7	Meaning of Music	Musical meaning and the manner of musical communication by Leonard Meyer
8	Meaning of Music	Absolute music (instrumental music with no extrinsic context) and Vocal Music
9	Music and Society	Purposes of engaging in musical activities & types of listeners by Adorno
10	Music and Society	Mass Culture Theory
11	Music and Society	A business model based on the management model of a chamber orchestra
12	Music and Society	Influence of Music
13	Music and YOU	Final Reflection

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of disciplinary concepts, theories, and science/technology applications in music; offers insightful, well-developed critical analysis of music's impact on society and personal life.
B	Good Performance	Shows solid grasp of key concepts, theories, and science/technology applications in music; provides sound, reasonably developed critical reflection on music's impact on life.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Shows adequate understanding of core concepts and science/technology applications in music; reflective work is mostly descriptive with limited critical depth.
D	Marginal Pass	Shows only threshold understanding of core concepts and science/technology applications in music; reflective work is minimal or superficial, with little critical engagement.
F	Fail	Shows insufficient grasp of core concepts and science/technology applications in music; reflective work lacks meaningful critical reflection or is not satisfactorily completed.

Course AI Policy:

In this course, you may not use generative AI tools for any assessment tasks except grammar checking.

Recommended Texts and Materials:

Kania, Andrew. *Philosophy of Western Music: A Contemporary Introduction*. Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Kivy, Peter. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Lang, Lang. *The Boy Who Had a Dream*. Produced by Peiqi Cheng. Radio Television Hong Kong, 2004. DVD. (ML385 .H83 2004)

Heller, Ayelet. *Orpheus in the business world*. 60 min. EuroArts Music International, 2005. DVD. (HD31 .O785 2005)

Academic Integrity:

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry](#) for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.