

HUMA 2103: Introduction to Music Composition

DHSS, Division of Humanities, HKUST – Spring 2026

Instructor:	Steven Snowden
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Office hours:	Monday 11:30–1:30 PM, by appointment
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Instructional Assistant:	Galison Lau
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Lectures:	Wednesdays 12:00–13:50
Location:	Main Academic Building Rm 3020 (near lift 2)
Tutorials:	Wednesdays 14:00–14:50, 15:00–15:50, 16:00–16:50 PM
Location:	Main Academic Building Rm 3020

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

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). Concert schedule will be announced at a later date.

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: February 4

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

Week 2: February 11

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

Week 3: Feb 18

No Class - Public holiday

Week 4: 25

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

Week 5: March 4

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

Week 6: March 11

- 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: March 18

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

Week 8: March 25

MIDTERM IN-CLASS CONCERT: PERFORMANCE OF STUDENT COMPOSITIONS!

Audience welcome to attend!

Week 9: April 1

Public holiday, no class

Week 10: April 8

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

Week 11: April 15

- Rhythmic techniques: momentum; form; polyrhythms and triplets
- More in-class instrument demonstrations◦ *Everyone presents their initial plan for a final project composition*

Week 12: April 22

- *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: April 29

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