

# Northern Wyoming Community College District — Sheridan College

## MUSC 1070 Private Lessons: Composition (2 credits)

Fall 2016 • Days and Times TBA

Whitney 140-J • Music Department • Fine Arts Division

[proferickson.com](http://proferickson.com)

### Instructor and Contact Information

Dr. Christian Erickson

Office: Whitney 140-J

Office hours: Office hours: MTWThF 10:00 AM (additional hours by appointment)

(307) 674-6446, extension 3050

[dr.christian.erickson@gmail.com](mailto:dr.christian.erickson@gmail.com) (preferred method of contact)

### Course Description

This is a course for students wishing to study music composition in a one-on-one lesson setting. Focus is on the development of an individual creative musical language through the exploration of traditional and contemporary techniques of music composition. Students meet with their instructor for one private (30) thirty-minute lesson each week. Students may continue to enroll in MUSC 1070 Private Lessons: Composition during subsequent semesters.

### Prerequisites

An ability to read and write traditional Western music notation is helpful, but not required.

### Co-requisites

None

### Purpose

MUSC 1070 Private Lessons: Composition may be applied as an elective for any degree, and is a requirement of the Associate of Fine Arts Degree in Music (Music Technology Emphasis).

### Course Format

Lessons – 30 minutes of lesson time and 120 minutes of arranged practice time per week

### Grading

Letter

### Texts/Materials

- Pens, pencils, erasers, notebook, etc.
- Internet access
- USB flash drive (2GB or larger)

## **Minimum Student Outcomes**

Upon completion of MUSC 1070 Private Lessons: Composition, the student will:

- demonstrate understanding of theoretical concepts of music composition.
- apply compositional techniques appropriate for the level of study.
- explain content of musical works with regard to style, technical aspects and aesthetics.
- demonstrate creative competency via the composition of original works in a variety of genres.

## **Approximate Final Grade Evaluation**

40% — Portfolio

— Major Composition(s), 20%

— Minor Compositions, 20%

25% — Technique Assignments

15% — Analysis Assignments

10% — Attendance and Participation

10% — Symposium Performance or Jury Presentation

## **Course Structure**

Students will meet weekly with the instructor to discuss theoretical concepts and techniques, and to receive feedback on technique assignments and compositions.

## **Descriptions of Graded Course Components**

**Portfolio:** [Letter-graded] Students will work on a core portfolio of compositions over the course of the semester. It will include a major original composition (more than one may be completed depending on the student's prolificacy), and two short, instructor-assigned compositions that will incorporate various techniques explored during the semester of study. A final copy of the portfolio will be submitted at the end of the semester. Depending on the student's method of recording their work (see "Mechanics" section), this may be a bound collection of paper, an archive of digital documents, or a combination of both.

**Technique Assignments:** [Completion-graded] Akin to scales, arpeggios and études of instrumental studies, short composition exercises will be assigned on a weekly basis. These will entail writing miniature compositions of 8 to 16 bars (on average) that incorporate a specific compositional technique. After the completion of several of these assignments, the student will

compose a short work that demonstrates proficiency in the use of the techniques studies. These short compositions will account for the Minor Compositions portion of the Portfolio (see above).

**Analysis Assignments:** [Completion-graded] An important contemporary (post-1945) composer and a representative composition will be examined by the student in a instructor-directed analysis. Analysis of the piece will reveal concepts and techniques that the student may wish to incorporate into his or her own work.

**Attendance and Participation:** For all private study courses, the Sheridan College Department of Music requires attendance of a minimum of 14 lessons (semesters are typically 14 or 15 weeks long). Excessive absences will be negatively factored into the final grade. Please see the "Absences and Make-Up Policy" section for further information.

Students are expected to make significant progress on their compositions and assignments between lessons. Weekly goals will be established during each meeting. Effective interaction between the instructor and student can only occur when the student has completed some sort of independent work in the interim between lessons. This work may include:

- researching a composition by listening to exemplary recordings, examining model scores, or Technique Exercise relevant articles or treatises.
- planning a composition in a verbal or graphic description in a notebook or on the computer.
- completion of the Technique Assignments and/or Minor Compositions.
- sketching and refining the Major Composition.

In short, as there are plenty of activities to focus on during the week, there is little reason to come to a lesson without material for discussion. Doing so will be considered a lack of participation and will be accordingly factored into the this portion of the final grade.

**Symposium Performance or Jury Presentation:** [Completion-graded for Option 1, letter-graded for Option 2]

- Option 1: Students are strongly encouraged to recruit and write for live players. Collaboration with other musicians affords a unique interactive experience that writing for only yourself or on the computer does not. It's also quite exciting to hear your work performed by others in a public venue. The best way of satisfying this requirement is to write your Major Composition with specific players in mind, then mount the piece for the Composers' Symposium held near the end of the semester. Students who write a solo work for the instrument they play may also consider this option, performing the work personally.
- Option 2: For those students who work in an electronic medium or are unable to participate in the Symposium should prepare a short presentation of the piece for a jury of music faculty. Members of the jury will assign a grade for the composition and presentation. The jury grade will be an average of the scores given by individual jury members.

## **Expectations & “Practice” Routine**

While composition lessons may consist of demonstrations of techniques, listening activities, or discussions of aesthetics, the primary aspect that drives the lesson is the review of the student’s weekly work. In order for me to “shepherd” students through the completion of their creative work, they must consistently bring new or revised work to each lesson. If there is nothing to discuss, it undermines the primary impetus for the lesson. My policy for dealing with students who have nothing to show is to send them off to a practice room to write and simply dock any assessment points related to that lesson. The lesson time should be for reflection and planning rather than composition-on-the-spot. Please come prepared.

Like a vocalist or instrumentalist, the composer must “practice” his or her craft on a regular basis. Numerous shorter work sessions will be more beneficial than “marathon” sessions (especially when those marathon sessions occur just before the time of the lesson!). It’s important to set aside a time when you can work unrestricted on your pieces. Personally, I would suggest either 30-45 minutes on a daily basis, or 1 hour to 1.5 hours every other day. I discourage sessions going beyond 2 hours. Composition requires intense concentration and fatigue will inevitably set in. Don’t spend time beyond your energy threshold writing weak material that you’re going to despise the next morning!

So, in short, working regularly on your compositions through the week will result in pieces that grow and develop organically, and will give you plenty of material to bring to your lessons. Some days it will flow easily and others you’ll find yourself having to just “crank it out.” However, consistency, patience, and self-discipline will pay off in the end.

## **The Mechanics of Recording of Your Work**

Consider a scene from *Amadeus* (1984):

**Emanuel Schikaneder:** So let me see it [the score to The Magic Flute]. Where is it?

**Mozart:** [pointing to his head] Here. It's all right here in my noodle. The rest is just scribbling. Scribbling and babbling, babbling and scribbling.

**Schikaneder:** Just write it down. On paper. It's no use to anybody in your head.

Obviously students have to capture their ideas in a fixed format in order to present it to the instructor, to performers, jurists, and, ultimately, to listeners. There are a number of ways of doing so.

The historical clichéd image of the composer sitting at the piano with a pen and blank manuscript paper is one way (or at least that's the way to pose for paintings and photographs if you're a composer!). Yes, Beethoven scratched out his ideas on paper with a quill pen, producing nightmarishly illegible manuscripts that somehow were deciphered by his publisher and copyists.

On the other hand, John Lennon and Paul McCartney didn't read a lick of music, yet produced some of the most influential compositions of the twentieth century. They scribbled lyrics on stationery, napkins...whatever was handy. And they either remembered the music or captured their ideas with a portable tape recorder (low tech, mind you, but effective).

Film composer Hans Zimmer is also a notation "illiterate." He creates mock-ups of his elaborate orchestral scores using a computer, playing and layering each of the parts one at a time. He then sends off his files to his staff of copyists who transform his work into parts that a studio orchestra can read during the final recording session. His "handicap" hasn't prevented him from being nominated for an Oscar eight times, winning one for *The Lion King*.

The point is that all of these musicians have different methods and tools for capturing and sharing their ideas. I will not advocate any method over another (although all students will do some sketching on the Technique Assignments). The best system is going to be the one that allows the student to work as quickly as possible and interferes the least with the creative process. The tools need to be transparent...an extension of your brain...in order to be effective. Choose the one (or combination of methods) that allows you to focus on music creation rather than the mechanics of your recording procedure. Remember, partial credit is always better than no credit at all.

## Absences and Make-Up Policy

**Excused Absences:** In cases of school-sponsored activities or illness resulting in an absence by the student, it is the student's responsibility to notify the instructor in advance of the lesson. Absences with advance notice are considered "excused" and may be rescheduled by the student. Make-up lessons for excused absences must be scheduled in advance and completed before the next regularly scheduled lesson.

**Unexcused Absences:** Absences without prior notification to the instructor are considered "unexcused." These missed lessons cannot be rescheduled.

**Instructor Cancellations:** On rare occasion I may have to cancel a lesson. If such a cancellation occurs, the student may schedule a make-up lesson at a time that is mutually convenient for the student and instructor, or choose to simply be excused from attending the lesson altogether. I will make every effort possible to notify a student in advance of the missed lesson should I be unable to attend.

## Course Withdrawal/Petition for Incomplete Grade

A temporary grade of "I" or "incomplete" is available to students who cannot finish the course due to an emergency situation that arises late in the semester. The administration of an incomplete is at the instructor's discretion. Although I can be flexible depending on the circumstances of the student, my general policy is that the student should have at least 75% of

the course completed and have a current grade of C or better at the time of the request for the incomplete grade. The incomplete portion of the course must be completed by the end of the semester following the request (summer sessions excluded) or the "I" will revert to an "F."

## **Northern Wyoming Community College District Policies**

**Academic Honesty Statement:** Students are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Academic honesty means performing all academic work without lying, cheating, deceit, plagiarism, misrepresentation, or unfairly gaining advantage over any other student. Violations of academic honesty are in violation of District standards for student conduct and shall result in disciplinary action.

**Institutional Attendance Policy:** Regular attendance is expected of all students attending NWCCD so they may fully benefit from the educational experience. Students receiving financial aid must regularly attend class and actively participate in their coursework in order to earn their aid. Students failing to do so may be held liable for returning financial aid funds. Visit the Office of Financial Aid Services for more information.

**Disability Statement:** Students with disabilities who believe they may need accommodations in this class must contact the disabilities services coordinator on their campus as soon as possible to request such accommodations.

A complete list of official college policies can be found on the NWCCD website by pointing your browser to this shortcut: **[mcaf.ee/7018c](http://mcaf.ee/7018c)**