

Spring 2020_Myra Melford_MU128 Topics in European and American Music

Now's the Time: How, When and Why We Improvise

Myra Melford, Professor of Music + Guest Presenters from Across Campus and the Community

Office Hours: Wednesday 1 – 3pm, by appointment, Morrison 208

Class Sessions:

Monday, 10:30am – 11:59am, Morrison 250

Wednesday, 10:30am – 11:59am, Morrison 128

Why do we improvise? When do improvise? How do we improvise? What kinds of skills does it take to improvise? How might consciously cultivating the skills of an improviser be useful to us regardless of what field we may pursue? What is the role and value of improvisation in our lives?

The contemporary music genres of jazz, blues and various sub-genres and practices of creative jazz and improvisational music, all require that performers be able to make up music on the spot. In this course, we will study the complex and often mysterious phenomenon of improvisation as it applies to this music, as well as more diverse fields of study, and to our daily lives.

Along with our study of improvisational music, we'll look at a number of other disciplines that intentionally embrace improvisation as a practice, and/or an artistic end-product, and those that use it as a means to an end (whether intentional, or not, and whether or not they call it improvisation) such as sports, theater and comedy, literature and poetry, visual arts, computer science and design, science, and business. In doing so, we will be making connections about improvisation through different fields of inquiry, pursuing a cross-disciplinary dialogue that will give us a deeper understanding of the role and value of improvisation in our lives.

No prior musical training is required for this course. An open mind and ears are highly recommended along with a willingness to jump in and try new things – there will be a strong emphasis on experiential learning!

The course will meet twice weekly. Some meetings will be lecture, discussion, and practice with Professor Melford, on both musical improvisation (including an ongoing experiential improvisational sound art project) and wider readings in improvisation studies in order to prepare for, or follow up on, guest presentations. Other meetings will be a lab for hands-on activities, small group projects and guest sessions. Our guests, coming from across campus and the community, will present on how improvisation is used in or useful to their field and lead an activity to explore/apply what we've learned.

Throughout the semester we will be deepening and broadening what we know about improvisation, developing new skills and awareness of the following:

- Trusting our instincts and developing our instinctual nature
- Taking risks based on intuition as well as intellect
- Developing the ability to think, act, respond on the spot
- Entering the unknown – engaging things you don't know how to do! Or for which you don't know the outcome.
- The value and importance of making mistakes
- Patience
- Brainstorming/innovating ideas
- Greater ability to collaborate, learning to present and work as a team
- Developing tools to enable all voices to be heard
- Creating a field of intentions and improvising within that
- Improvisation as research or how research is an improvisational process

- The joy that improvisers experience – experimentation and the willingness to have fun (play!)
- Existing in the moment
- How to prepare for situations of possibility where you can't plan, and don't know what will happen

Selected Readings, available on bCourses, will be assigned from among the following sources (partial bibliography):

The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation Studies (Vols. 1 and 2) edited by George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut

Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation, Charles Jencks, MIT Press

The Improvisation Studies Reader, Ajay Heble, Routledge

Improvisation and Social Aesthetics (Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice), edited by Georgina Born, Duke University Press

Yes to the Mess, Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz, Frank Barrett, Harvard Business Review Press

The Art of Is, Stephen Nachmanovitch, New World Library

Sonny's Blues, James Baldwin, The Jazz Fiction Anthology, Indiana University Press

Artful Design, Ge Wang

Deep Listening, A Composer's Sound Practice, Pauline Oliveros

Grading: Total 1000 Points

Attendance (including at least 2 live concerts and/or 2 episodes of BBC 4 On the Edge series by Derek Bailey plus all weekly reading/short writing assignments: 400 Points

Midterm Project – Creation and Improvised Performance of a Graphic Score: 200 Points

Final Project – Zoom presentation of Problem Solution using Principles and Strategies of Improvisation): 200 Points

Final Take Home Essay: 200 Points

Attendance: Since this is an experiential learning environment, your attendance is required in order to pass the class. You are allowed two absences (excused or unexcused) and two tardies over the course of the semester. Additional absence or lateness will lower your participation grade by 10 points each. It is up to you to check in with instructor or your classmates about what you missed.

Concert Attendance: There will be several concerts you will be invited to attend over the course of the semester, you must attend at least two of them. If you find another performance you'd like to go to, please send me a link to it, and I'll see if meets the requirement. IF unable to attend live concert/s, you may watch 1 or 2 episodes from On the Edge by Derek Bailey, BBC 4 Production.

SCHEDULE: Any changes will be announced on bCourses

Week 1

Jan 22: Introduction to MU 128 Now's the Time, How, When and Why We Improvise
Morrison 128

Week 2

Jan 27: Guest Tom Nunn, Skatchbox Instrument Building Session, Morrison 250

Jan 29: Guest Chris Miller, Theater/Comedy Improvisation Exercises and Principles (Sonoma, CA), Morrison 128

Week 3

Feb 3: Guest Chris Jonas – Music and Community Activism (a multi-arts improviser's approach to community engagement) (Santa Fe, NM)

Feb 5: Guest Richard Freishtat - Business Management and improvisational skill development (UC Berkeley)

Feb 9: Concert: Cal Performances Zellerbach Hall Stage, Two Piano/Saxophone Duos: Kris Davis and Ingrid Laubrock, Matt Mitchell and Tim Berne

Week 4

Feb 10: Guests Rova Saxophone Quartet (Bay Area) – Lec/Dem and Skatchbox Practice

Feb 12: lecture – review of principles/strategies to date, discussion and practice with Melford (Midterm Project Assigned)

Feb 15: Concert: Hertz Hall, Rova Saxophone Quartet with Myra Melford, opening set by the Berkeley Nu Jazz Collective

Week 5

Feb 17: school holiday

Feb 19: Guest bassist/composer/improviser Lisa Mezzacappa (Berkeley, CA)
Lecture on Graphic Scores for Improvisers and preparation for midterm project
Homework – Read Sonny's Blues, James Baldwin and listen to Am I Blue, for Maya Kronfeld – Comp Lit presentation, Feb 24 Visit

Week 6

Feb 24: Guest Maya Kronfeld (pianist and recent PhD in Comp Lit) – Blues Devices in Literature (James Baldwin)

Feb 26: Guest Eric Paulos/EECS – Creative Problem Solving and Design 11am – 12pm)

Feb 29: Concert: Cal Performances ECO Ensemble, Hertz Hall, program includes Melford's *Homogeneous Infiltration* with Myra Melford on piano and improvising chamber ensemble, conducted by David Milnes

Week 7

Mar 2: lecture, discussion and practice with Melford - midterm prep in small groups
Midterm assignment: in Groups of four, you will create a graphic score for improvisation using sound and music (text and other media are welcome), perform the piece for the class, and submit a 1 page set of program notes describing the process for creating the piece and guidance on how to listen to it.

Mar 4 Guest: Ben Goldberg

Originally scheduled guest, Josh Kun, Director of the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, USC (PhD Ethnic Studies, UC Berkeley)_Improvisation and Community

Week 8

Mar 9: Guest poet Lyn Hejinian – Improvisation and Creative Writing (UC Berkeley)

Mar 11: Midterm Prep with Melford

Week 9 Mar 16 Originally scheduled guest Taylor Ho Bynum, cornetist/composer/improviser and director of the Dartmouth College Big Band with members of the Big Band

Mar 17: Concert with Dartmouth Big Band plus Berkeley Nu Jazz Collective 7:30pm, 250 Morrison Hall (Canceled – Covid – 19)

Mar 18: Midterm with Melford (upload video and/or audio recordings and program notes to Box)

Week 10

Mar 30: Guest Paul Canales, chef at Duende, Oakland (Canceled) – Lecture on John Zorn's Cobra with Melford (first class on Zoom).

Apr 1: Guests composer/bassist Lisa Mezzacappa and choreographer Risa Jaroslow

Apr 2 – 5: Concerts (Canceled) - Other Minds Improvisation Festival - Moment's Notice, San Francisco

<https://www.otherminds.org/other-minds-festival-25/>

Week 11

Apr 6: Preparation for Final Projects with Melford

Final Project Assignment: You will each be assigned a topic (from the list of issues/problems we generate on April 6) and a team of five (total) collaborators, who share your interests. Employing your new skills and knowledge of how to use improvisation for creative problem solving, to compose or put things together, you'll collaborate to develop three ways you might creatively approach problem solving this issue using principles, strategies, skill building exercises, etc., from the various disciplines we've engaged over the course of the semester, and present these to the class.

Apr 8: Guest Ge Wang - "The Time Is Now: Programmability, Design, and Improvisation with the Chuck Music Language," CCRMA, Stanford University

Week 12

Apr 13: Small Group Preparation for Final Projects

Apr 14: Concert (Canceled) : Myra Melford's Snowy Egret at Freight & Salvage, Berkeley or Amir El Safaar – Cal Performances

Apr 15: Small Group Preparation for final projects

Week 13 Final Presentations

Apr 20: Small Group Preparation/dress rehearsals for final projects

Apr 22 Team presentations 1, 2 and 3

Week 14: Final Presentations

Apr 27 Team Presentations 4, 5, 6

Apr 29. Team Presentations 7, 8, 9

May 1 – Jazz X 2 Noon Concert HH (Canceled)

Week 15: RRR Week

May 4 – Final Review and Take-home final reflection assignment

The goal of this *MU 128 Now's The Time Final Reflection* is for you to look back on your experiences and learning this semester in the course. Reflection, assimilation and practice (implementation) are key to remembering and learning.

For your *Final Reflection*, please reflect broadly on your experiences of the class this semester. Please consider all of your experiences, including but not limited to in-class experiences with guest presenters, experiences learning and implementing new or different approaches to improvising, homework, creative assignments, reflective journals, concert attendance, "On the Edge" Episodes, and other experiences outside the class setting.

The University of California strives to prevent and respond to harassment and discrimination. Engaging in such behavior may result in removal from class or the University. If you are the subject of harassment or discrimination there are resources available to support you. Please contact the Confidential Care Advocate (sa.berkeley.edu/dean/confidential-care-advocate) for non-judgmental, caring assistance with options, rights and guidance through any process you may choose. Survivors of sexual violence may also want to view the following website: survivorsupport.berkeley.edu.

For more information about how the University responds to harassment and discrimination, please visit the Office for the Prevention of Harassment and Discrimination website: ophd.berkeley.edu.

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

Your emergency evacuation assembly area is **the lawn just south of Hertz Hall**.

In the event of an emergency please follow instructions from your instructor and Music Department staff.

Take note of emergency procedures posted in your classroom. If the fire alarm is sounding, exit the building immediately. In the event of an earthquake, duck when possible and hold in place, covering your head with your arms, a binder or your laptop. Then exit the building when the shaking stops.

If you are in a wheelchair and on the second floor of Morrison, proceed to the Designated Waiting Area for evacuation. A Disabled Evacuation Chair is located in the first floor classroom hallway.

If you are in a wheelchair and in the basement area, exit through the long locker hallway and through the service area out the door to your right at the end of the hall. You may need assistance to open the outside door.

EMERGENCY SERVICES:

- UC Police and all emergencies number from campus phones: **911**
- UC Police and all emergencies number from cell phones: **(510) 642-3333**
- UC Police non-emergency number: **(510) 642-6760**

RESTROOM ACCESS:

We recognize every individual's right to use a bathroom facility that corresponds with their gender identity or identities, regardless of their perceived gender presentation. Binary, gender-specific restrooms are located in the basement of Morrison Hall. For those who would prefer gender non-specific restrooms, there are two single-stall all gender restrooms with locking doors labeled with a white triangle on the second floor of the building.



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