

Syllabus

MUSI 402: Tonal counterpoint: Analysis and Composition (Fall 2021)

T-Th 1:00pm–2:15pm, STOECK 313.

Instructor: Malcolm Sailor

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Office hours: TBA

This course will explore tonal counterpoint as epitomized by the music of late-Baroque composers like Bach and Handel.

Because counterpoint is a topic best learned by doing, our main activity will be writing exercises and small compositions.

Topics covered will begin with principles of dissonance treatment and tonal harmony and culminate in fugue.

1 Expected schedule of topics

The schedule of topics will be adjusted to the interests and talents of the students in the course. Nevertheless, here is a preliminary list of subjects we will aim to cover:

- a review of voice-leading and harmony
- principles of dissonance treatment
- chorale harmonization in note-against-note style
- melodic embellishment
- chorale harmonization in florid style
- two-part counterpoint
- invertible counterpoint at the octave
- imitation
- sequence
- three-part counterpoint
- fugue exposition and tonal answer
- fugue

2 Coursework

The main coursework for this class will be **weekly written counterpoint exercises**. These exercises will be due (in paper copies) at the beginning of each Tuesday’s class. I will return a corrected version to you at Thursday’s class so your next week’s work can be informed by my feedback.

Another, smaller component of your coursework will be **low-stakes quizzes**. The purpose of these quizzes is not to evaluate or rank you. Instead, they are motivated by my aim to help you learn a great deal about counterpoint. Research on learning outcomes has shown that low-stakes quizzing is one of the most robust ways of learning and retaining new material.¹

Each Thursday class will begin with a brief (ca. 5 minutes) quiz consisting of two parts: **listening** and **written**. Concerning the written quizzes, they should be fairly self explanatory. Concerning the listening quizzes, see the section below. I will add only that I aim to be as explicit as possible about what you are expected to know, so that these quizzes will be easy for you.

2.1 Listening quizzes

We will be immersing ourselves in the musical style of the late Baroque. This is most readily done if you have a firm grasp how this style *sounds*. To help you obtain such a grasp, I will provide two or three movements each week (perhaps 10 minutes of music), in the form of a playlist.² You are welcome to listen to these movements in a focused way, but my expectation is more modest: that you will simply put the music on in the background, such as while you are studying. Absorbing a musical style through passive osmosis in this way can be surprisingly effective! The only purpose of the quizzes is as a friendly nudge to actually *do* this listening.

In each quiz, I will play two or three brief excerpts. Your task will merely be to indicate whether each excerpt was on the past week’s playlist. (To be clear, I will not try to “trick” you by playing excerpts from previous weeks.) I expect and hope that this task will be quite easy: the aim is not to assess your listening abilities, but instead, as a I say, merely to provide the sort of helpful nudge I myself would need to ensure I actually did the listening.

¹If you would like to know more, a recent review of relevant research is provided in McDermott, Kathleen B. 2021. “Practicing Retrieval Facilitates Learning.” *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 (1): 609–33. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010419-051019>. An accessible book-length account is Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel. 2014. *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

²I intend to use Spotify for this purpose but if any students are unable or unwilling to use Spotify I am happy to find another solution.

3 Prerequisites

MUSI 210 or permission of the instructor. In general, you should be able to read music notation and have a working knowledge of music theory. If you are uncertain of whether this course is for you, please feel free to discuss.

4 Course logistics

There is no required textbook for this course. In general, there will be little reading for this course. I will provide most information you will need to know in class, or in brief handouts.

You are encouraged to bring staff paper to class for taking notes. If you don't have any staff-paper, a template you can print is available on the course website.

Our in-class work will consist largely of working through counterpoint exercises together. After each class, I will post a pdf file of our work to the course website.

4.1 Electronics policy

Use of electronics (laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.) will not be permitted in class.

4.2 Course website

I will post all assignments, handouts, etc. to the course website at

<https://malcolmsailor.com/musi402fall2021>

4.3 Grading

- 60%: weekly counterpoint exercises
- 10%: midterm project
- 20%: final project
- 10%: quizzes

Concerning the due dates for the midterm and final projects, since this I expect this to be a small class, I will try to find a due date that doesn't inconvenience any of the students in the class.

4.3.1 Late assignments

It is important that you submit your assignments promptly so that I can return them to you and you can begin work on the following week's assignments. For this reason, late assignments will be penalized 10% per day.