



Renaissance Polyphony: Theory and Performance

Integrating musicianship, composition, conducting

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Designing the course of the Future (2014)

"When choirs sing, many hearts beat as one"

- NPR blog, July 10, 2013

About this course

Music, especially choral music in a chamber setting of eight to twelve singers, is an intimate experience involving communicating with fellow human beings verbally and non-verbally, feeling an intangible, yet very real pulse, and unifying voices to create something beautiful together. Renaissance vocal music lends itself particularly well to this shared experience. In this course, we combine the study of music theory with the practical aspect of music performance. The course culminates with a final project and concert, which synthesize the complementary aspects of theory and composition, editing and conducting, and performance and critique.

Who should take this course

This is a course for musicians interested in performing or conducting Renaissance vocal music. You will learn skills for interpreting, performing, and directing Renaissance music through reading original sources, editing scores, critiquing recordings, composition of parts from lost manuscripts, and planning and executing rehearsals with your classmates.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Read music notation from the Renaissance period and create your own editions of scores from original sources
- Sing motets and madrigals of the Renaissance period with expression by developing an appreciation for both horizontal (melodic) and vertical (harmonic) structures.
- Plan and direct a rehearsal of a Renaissance piece by marking up scores, making seating charts, and applying your skills in a real-life choral environment.

Prerequisites

You should be able to read modern staff notation and have an intermediate understanding of music theory (scales, chord quality, tonal harmony) at the level of Music 51a. We will be singing a lot of music and good sight singing skills are necessary. Experience in Renaissance Music performance is helpful, but not essential to achieve the objectives for this course.

Audition

Due to its nature, the course size is capped at 8 students. Entry to the course is by informal interview and audition. During the interview, you will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire on music theory and we will talk about what attracts you to this course. For the audition, be prepared to sing scales, pick out middle pitches from chords, and sight-sing a short excerpt as a solo and duet. A short solo passage such as a well-known hymn tune, "My country 'tis of thee", or "Happy birthday" is welcome; an accompanist will be provided. Selection will be based on ability to hear and sing solo and in parts, and how well we think the course matches your needs.

Class

Regular class meetings will be held once a week on Mondays. Over the course of the first 9 weeks, we will study the theory of Renaissance music from reading and transcribing early manuscripts to the basics of modal counterpoint and reconstruction. We will also discuss aspects of performance and conducting practice, including intonation systems, score editing, and preparing performance and conducting editions.

Rehearsal

We will conduct the performance aspect of this course through regular rehearsals once a week on Fridays. In the first 3 weeks, we will sing Gregorian chant from original manuscripts and modern transcriptions, as well as some 2- and 3-part music to build our sense of ensemble. Rehearsals in subsequent weeks will be led by students. Each one of you will select a short piece from the repertoire and lead rehearsal on that piece for 10 minutes in preparation for the final concert. Once our final projects are ready, we will hold two final rehearsals to sing through your pieces, which we will also perform at our final concert.

Sections

Sections for workshopping preliminary drafts of assignments and help on using Musescore will be held throughout the semester on Mondays and are optional. Although attendance in section does not count toward your final grade, participation is encouraged - you will find that you will learn quite a bit more having attempted that week's assignment before section.

Assignments and Final Project

Short weekly assignments in the first seven weeks count toward 40% of your grade. Through these, you will apply the theory and editorial skills you learn in class through composition and transcription exercises. The final project, which counts for 35% of the grade, is a recomposition assignment. You will be asked to locate and consult original manuscripts of a score with missing voices, transcribe the score into modern notation using the free music editing software Musescore (which we will learn to use in class), give a short presentation on your transcription (as a group), and recompose the missing voices (individually). You will have the opportunity to conduct your project at our final concert.

Attendance and Participation

Attendance and participation at rehearsals is essential. Since our class is small and involves performance aspects, the course relies on your participation for its success. Accordingly, any absence beyond three excused absences and one unexpected absence will result in reduction of your grade by 5 percentage points.

Meetings

Class

Wed., 2-4 PM

Rehearsal

Fri., 2-4 PM

Section

Mon., 10-11.30 AM

Key dates

October 16: Mid-term assignment due

*November 27:
Final project due*

*December 4:
Dress rehearsal*

*December 6:
Final concert*

Contact

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Grading

*Participation: 25%
Assignments: 40%
Final project: 35%*

Course Plan

	Wednesdays	Fridays
Week 1	Theory: reading manuscripts – chant notation, ligatures, church modes Editing: introduction to Muscores	Performance: chant
Week 2	Theory: two-voice counterpoint and cadences, ficta Editing: ficta	Performance: cadential gestures, phrasing Conducting: warming up
Week 3	Theory: three-voice counterpoint and cadences Editing: mensural notation, phrase and breath marks, articulation	Performance: three voice texture Conducting: two-voice texture
Week 4	Theory: text setting Editing: stressed syllables	Conducting: three-voices texture
Week 5	Theory: partbooks, reconstruction and recomposition	Performance: tempi and dynamics
Week 6	Theory: triple meter, 4 and 5v texture Editing: marking dynamics and duets	Performance: 4 and 5v texture; duets Conducting: sectioning a piece
Week 7	Theory: intonation systems Editing: transcribing from a recorded performance	Student rehearsal 1
Week 8	Theory: rehearsal practices for conductors	Student rehearsal 2
Week 9	Conducting and Early Music	Student rehearsal 3
Week 10	Student presentations	Student rehearsal 4
Week 11	Programming and publicity	Student rehearsal 5
Week 12	No meeting	Student rehearsal 6
Week 13	Student rehearsal 7 & 8	Read-through of final compositions
Week 14	Final performances	

Week 1

- ♪ *Theory*: We will take a look at original manuscripts of Gregorian chant and learn to read and transcribe the manuscripts to modern notation. In the process, we will learn about church modes (ambitus, final, reciting tone).
- ✎ *Editing*: Introduction to Music Notation Software (Musescore)
- 🎵 *Performance (directed by instructor)*: We will sing Gregorian chants from original notation and transcriptions as a group, and discuss the pros and cons of modern transcription.
- 🎵 *Composition Assignment*: write a melody in 1 chant modes (20 seconds).
Editing Assignment: transcribe a section of Gregorian chant.

Week 2

- 📖 *Reading*: Gauldin, chapter 2 – 5
- ♪ *Theory*: We will begin our study of two-part music with the Lassus *Bicinia* and Morley 2-part canzonets. We will analyze and categorize two-voice cadences and learn about ficta.
- ✎ *Editing*: ficta
- 🎵 *Conducting*: warm-up (led by student 1)
- 🎵 *Performance (directed by instructor)*: We will sing a 2-part canzonet and learn phrasing, breathing, dynamics, and inflection.
- 🎵 *Composition Assignment*: write a 2v piece in a chant mode (2 phrases, at most 20 seconds).
Editing Assignment: mark up a two-voice score with breaths and dynamics.

Week 3

- 📖 *Reading*: Gauldin, chapter 8
- ♪ *Theory*: We will extend our purview to three voices using Byrd's *Mass for 3 Voices*.
- ✎ *Editing*: Mensurstriche, phrase and breath marks, articulations
- 🎵 *Conducting*: warm-up (led by student 2), conducting two voices (all students)
- 🎵 *Performance (directed by instructor)*: We will sing sections from Byrd's *Mass for 3 Voices*.
- 🎵 *Composition Assignment*: write a 3v piece in a chant mode (2 phrases, at most 20 seconds).
Editing Assignment: mark up a three-voice score with breaths and dynamics.


Week 4

- 📖 *Reading*: TBD
- ♪ *Theory*: Text setting
- ✎ *Editing*: Text setting, stressed syllables
- 🎵 *Conducting*: warm-up (led by student 3), conducting three voices (all students)
- 🎵 *Theory Assignment*: find the melodic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal errors in a piece provided.
Editing Assignment: provide text underlay to an excerpt from Byrd's *Mass for 3 Voices*


Week 5

- 📖 *Reading*: Gauldin, chapter 16
- ♪ *Theory*: We will introduce partbooks and reconstruct a 3v piece from its constituents.
- 🎵 *Conducting*: warm-up (led by student 4)
- 🎵 *Performance (directed by instructor)*: tempi and dynamics
- 🎵 *Composition Assignment*: recompose a) the mean and b) the bass voice in a 3v texture.
Mid-term assignment part 1: transcribe treble, tenor, and bass for the assigned piece.

Week 6


 *Reading:* TBD

 *Theory:* Triple meter, 4v and 5v texture


 *Editing:* marking dynamics and duets


 *Conducting:* warm-up (led by student 5), sectioning and rehearsing pieces, rehearsal plans


 *Performance (directed by instructor):* Performing 4 and 5 voices; duets within polyphony.

 *Mid-term assignment part 2:* recompose the alto voice for the assigned piece and prepare a performance edition.

Week 7 (Mid term assignment due)

 *Theory:* Guest lecture – tuning in Early Music


 *Editing:* transcribing dynamics, phrasing and gestures from performances to a score


 *Conducting:* warm-up (led by student 6), student rehearsal 1

 *Theory Assignment:* recompose the treble voice in a segment of 5v polyphony.

Editing Assignment– Transcribe gestures from a recording to a score


Week 8


 *Theory:* Rehearsal practices for conductors

 *Conducting:* warm-up (led by student 7), student rehearsal 2

 *Assignment:* [Final Project] Part 1

Week 9


 *Theory:* Guest lecture – conducting and Early Music

 *Conducting:* warm-up (led by student 8), student rehearsal 3

 *Assignment:* [Final Project] Part 2 – prepare presentations


Week 10

 *Theory:* Student presentations


 *Conducting:* student rehearsal 4

 *Assignment:* [Final Project] Part 3 – recomposition


Week 11

 *Theory:* Programming and publicity


 *Conducting:* student rehearsal 5

 *Assignment:* [Final Project] Part 3 – update recomposition

Week 12

 *Theory:* no meeting

 *Conducting:* student rehearsal 6

 *Assignment:* [Final Project] Part 4 – prepare conducting and performer's scores

Week 13 (Final project recomposition due)

Student rehearsals 7 & 8: read-through and rehearsals of final assignments (both days of week)

Week 14

Final concert