

**Syllabus**  
**Music 87 – Freshman Seminar**  
**Improvising Music in a Complex Age**  
**Fall 2005**  
**University of California, San Diego**

**Instructor:** Dr. David Borgo

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**Program Description**

The Freshman Seminar Program is designed to provide new students with the opportunity to explore an intellectual topic with a faculty member in a small seminar setting.

**Course Summary**

Investigates the practice of learning, developing, and performing improvised music in light of current thinking about creativity in the contemporary sciences. Highlighted with examples of improvised music drawn from several stylistic and cultural domains.

**Grading**

The grading for this course is done exclusively on a Pass/Not Pass basis. To earn a passing grade, you will be expected to attend all three meetings of the seminar, do the outside reading assignments, participate actively in class discussions, and make a short final presentation to the class and lead discussion on some original research relating to the course. Additional details about these presentations will be discussed in class.

**Class Schedule –**

- Mandeville B-125 Thursdays, 2:00 p.m. - 4:50 p.m.
- Seminar will meet Oct. 13, 20, 27, with student presentations on the 27th

**Class Presentations**

Identify and research an example of improvised music. This could be a genre or style of music, a specific performer, or a specific musical example. As you investigate your topic try to relate it to the issues explored in the class. Presentations will average 5-10 minutes and should whenever possible include some listening to share with the class. I will have full stereo and internet access available for playback. Further details of the projects will be discussed in class or see me for additional help.

## **Improvisation and Creativity: Some Questions**

Can we define improvisation? What does the process of improvisation involve? On what does one improvise? Why might one wish to do so?

What is the difference between improvisation and composition? interpretation, embellishment, or variation? spontaneity? randomness? novelty or innovation? What is the relationship of improvisation to tradition?

How do musicians and listeners conceive of improvisation in our culture? In other cultures? Are cross-cultural definitions or studies of improvisation possible or valid?

Can we analyze improvisation? in the moment of performance? after the fact? Can or should improvisation be evaluated in the same light as “composed” music? Are there differences between product-oriented creativity and process-oriented creativity? What makes for an exemplary or superlative improvisation? Why has this broadly extended phenomenon been so rarely studied?

Are there cognitive or psychological limits imposed on artistic creativity? What role do the mind and the body play during improvisation? What effect does improvising in a group have on performers? Are there spiritual aspects to creativity? Can we discuss these? What possibilities might arise from human-computer-interfaces in improvised performance?

Can improvisation be taught? How do methods vary from culture to culture? How does instrumental training affect improvised creativity? What are the potential benefits and potential detriments to the institutionalized teaching of improvisation?

What appeals to audiences about improvised performance? What may be unappealing? How does the relationship between the audience and performer(s) affect the process of improvising?

How does improvised music fit within the economic and political structures of the music industry and the music academy? What role has race and gender played in these political and economic struggles?