

STUDIES IN SONGWRITING

A Research-Creation Seminar

Music 9740

Term 1 (September), 2026

Dr R Toft (rtoft@uwo.ca)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar focuses on the practice of “pop” songwriting within the context of research-creation in music. The course embraces an approach to song composition that combines creative processes and academic practices to foster innovation and the development of knowledge through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation. In other words, both the act of creating something novel and the processes, techniques, and methodologies belonging to a given field are central to research-creation. Artist-researchers are individuals whose work involves both the creation of art *and* the research that underpins creative activity. The outcome may be an object (e.g., a score) or something that exists over time (e.g., a recording, a video, a performance).

As artist-researchers, seminar participants will divide their time between research (on songwriting) and practice (composing songs). At the beginning of the semester, students will analyze two songs, one from their favourite genre and the other from an unfamiliar musical style, to discover the fundamental characteristics of both genres. This research will serve as preparation for writing an original song in each of the chosen styles. Lyrics, melody, and harmony will be considered in relation to the expressive flow of events across the “spans of meaning” that comprise the structures typical of songs identifiable as “popular” music.

In the first part of the term, participants will present the findings of their analyses to the seminar. They will then compose the two songs (in a workshop setting) across the remainder of the term. Everyone must be prepared to perform sections of their songs in the workshops (self accompanied) and to engage actively in constructive criticism of the material heard.

No previous experience in songwriting is expected.

COURSE MATERIALS

There are no required texts or other materials for the seminar (hence, no cost to participants). However, readings will be suggested in class, and the knowledge base for the analyses will be established in the first two meetings.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

40% Presentation of two analyses (weeks 3-6)

60% Two songs submitted in recorded form (a simple recording in something like GarageBand, using the built-in mic of a computer, will suffice), plus a lead sheet (accurately notated vocal line, plus words and chord symbols) – due last day of classes

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, participants will learn to compose a song in each of two popular-music styles, as described in the course description.

By the end of this course, students will be able to demonstrate the knowledge and skills necessary to understand the musical style of two different popular-music styles.

By the end of this course, students will understand how the concepts associated with research-creation apply to songwriting.

Course Timeline and Format

In the first part of the term, participants will present the findings of their analyses to the seminar. They will then compose the two songs (in a workshop setting) across the remainder of the term. Everyone must be prepared to perform sections of their songs in the workshops (self accompanied) and to engage actively in constructive criticism of the material heard.

The Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The use of generative artificial intelligence (AI), which includes all AI tools, software, and apps, is strictly prohibited in this course.

Enrolment Restrictions

Enrolment in this course is restricted to graduate students in Music.

Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously, and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

Gender-Based and Sexual Violence

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website: https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.

Health and Wellness Services

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health Support at <https://www.uwo.ca/health/psych/index.html> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Accessible Education Western (AEW)

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program.

Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education Western (AEW), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AEW and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.