

A Comprehensive-Immersive Approach to Beginning Composition Instruction



Report from the University of North Texas (USA)

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Presentation Outline

- Initial Considerations
- Context for Program Changes
- Goals for Restructured Beginning Composition Model
- Beginning Composition: Course Structure
- UNT Composition Studies: Undergraduate Program Overview
- Results

Initial Considerations

- Composition is an inherently comprehensive activity, encompassing the following areas:
 - Performance/conducting
 - Improvisation
 - Music theory
 - Music literature
 - Music notation
 - Orchestration
 - Technology

- Study of the above areas is supplemented by other art forms (literature, visual arts, dance, film), as well as cultural, social, and historical trends.

- Exposure to a variety of contemporary musical styles and techniques is critical to the understanding and application of compositional resources at the beginning of the 21st century.

- Where does the instructor begin with the novice composer?

- How does one effectively integrate the above areas without overwhelming the student?

Context for Program Changes

- University of North Texas: “a student-centered emerging research institution”
 - College of Music: enrollment c. 1700 students (c. 2/3 undergraduate)
 - Composition Program: enrollment c.60 students (c.2/5 undergraduate)
- Bachelor of Music degrees in a variety of majors, as well as a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music.
- Contemporary Music course taught during fourth year of program.
- Beginning Composition course structure (until 1999):
 - Original course loosely structured; met only once per week.
 - Course originally offered only to declared composition majors after approval of portfolio.

Goals for Restructured Beginning Composition Model

- Acceptance of a broader definition of the term “music” through exposure to contemporary musical idioms.
- Learning what to listen for in a piece of music, within the appropriate cultural, historical, theoretical, and aesthetic contexts.
- Development of critical thinking skills and the ability to assess “quality” in a wide variety of music.
- Recognition and application of various melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and structural materials.
- The ability to create short but cohesive and effective musical compositions, drawing upon a wide range of techniques and stylistic approaches.

Beginning Composition: Course Structure & Content

- Three-part course schedule allows for a thorough pedagogical approach:
 - **Lecture**: literature, concepts, techniques, contextualization.
 - **Laboratory**: practical application of material presented in the lectures.
 - **Departmental**: guest lectures, faculty presentations, roundtable discussions, and performances pertaining to contemporary music.
- Course is required of prospective composition students, undergraduate theory majors, and jazz arranging majors.
- Course is open to any qualified student interested in studying composition.
- Course assignments are varied and comprehensive:
 - Guided **composition projects** (6 per semester, plus **final project**).
 - **Source readings** (1-2 per week)
 - **Score study** and **listening** assignments (3 per week)
 - **Journal entries**
 - **Concert reviews** (2 per semester)
- Carefully prescribed composition project guidelines help develop good working habits, critical thinking skills, and technical facility.

UNT Composition Studies: Undergraduate Program Overview

Year 1 (Freshmen):

- Beginning Composition course taken concurrently with Theory, Aural Skills, and applied lessons on an instrument or voice.
- Following Beginning Composition sequence, prospective composition students must pass the Freshman Barrier Examination, consisting of:
 - **Repertoire**: listening and score identification.
 - **Terminology**: understanding of contemporary musical concepts.
 - **Aural Examination**: contemporary melodic and harmonic material.
- Non-composition majors may take more advanced composition courses at the discretion of the composition faculty.

Year 2 (Sophomores):

- Enrollment in **composition lessons** with a graduate teaching assistant.
- Participation in a weekly **composition seminar** with the faculty mentor.
- Student's composition portfolio, performance record, and contribution to the program are evaluated in a **jury** at the end of the sophomore year.

UNT Composition Studies: Undergraduate Program Overview

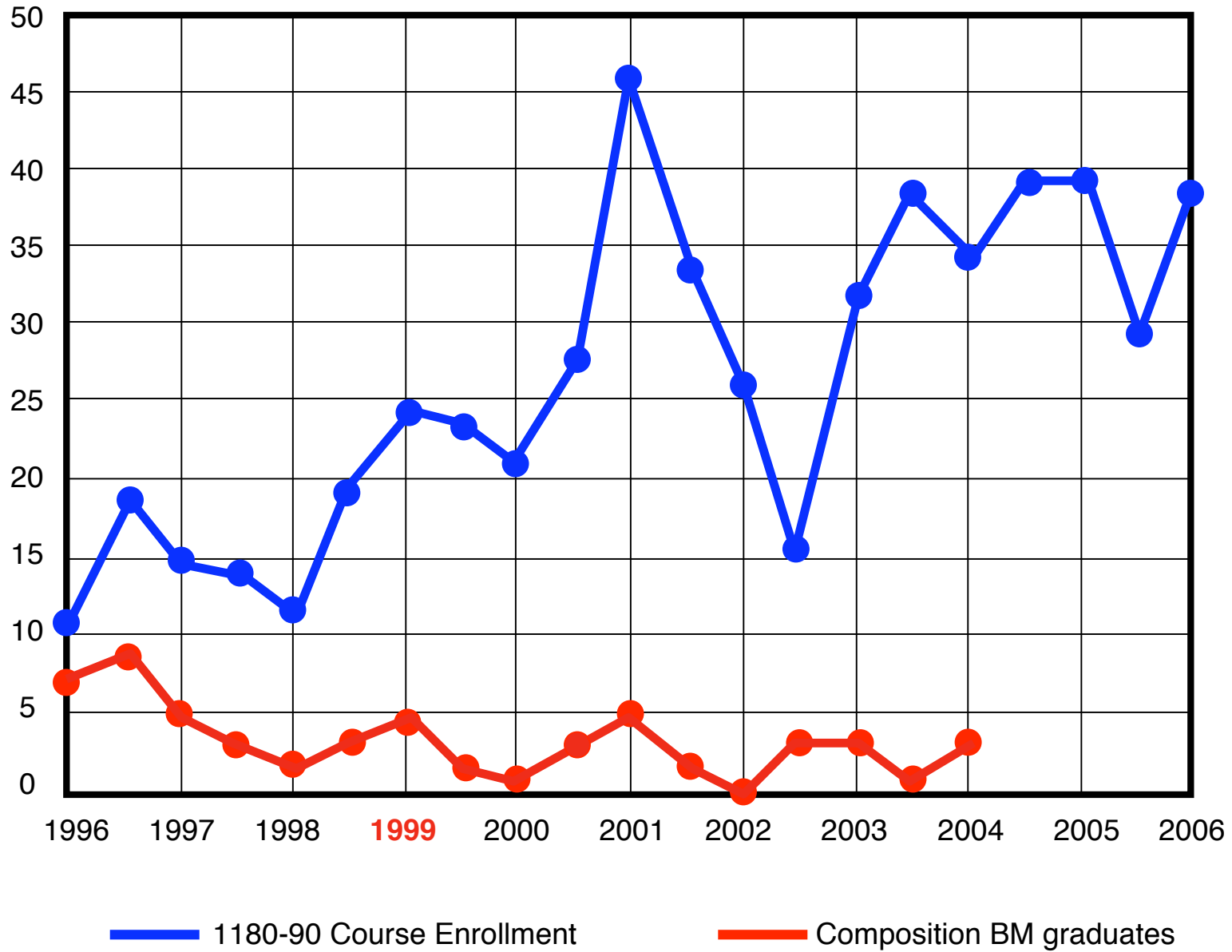
Years 3-4 (Juniors and Seniors):

- Enrollment in **composition lessons** with a composition faculty member.
- Enrollment in **advanced composition courses** (12 credit hours minimum).
- Continued attendance at weekly **departmental** meetings.
- Enrollment in “**non-traditional**” **ensembles** encouraged.
- Development of a **composition portfolio**, which must include the following:
 - Solo work
 - Electro-acoustic work
 - Work for chamber ensemble
 - Vocal work
 - Large scale (multi-movement) work
- Demonstrated competency composing for each family of instruments, voice, and electroacoustic media.
- Presentation of a **senior composition recital** following the recital hearing and final portfolio review.

Results

- Beginning Composition course enrollment has increased 300% since 1996.
- Net *decrease* in students graduating with a Bachelor of Music degree in composition.
- Improved quality of senior composition recitals and higher acceptance rates to quality graduate composition programs.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests a greater appreciation for contemporary modes of musical expression.
- Increased exposure to music outside the Western canon has provided more opportunities for graduating composers.

Beginning Composition: Enrollment and Graduation Rates (1996-2006)



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