

**The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation:  
Modern Traditions in Creative Music**  
FYS 129

**Syllabus**

Humanities and Social Sciences 61  
Thursday 11:30 am - 12:45 pm

Prof. David J. Keffer  
dkeffer@utk.edu

**G. Safe and Effective Education During a Pandemic:**

The faculty and staff of the University of Tennessee are committed to offering a safe environment for effective education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The success of this endeavor requires that all members of the UTK community contribute to creating and maintaining a safe environment. The most important points are summarized below.

- **Fill out the Daily Self Screening before your first class of the day.** Either use the phone app or the website <https://selfscreen.utk.edu/>.
- **Check campus locations impacted by the pandemic before your first class of the day.** Visit the website <https://tiny.utk.edu/tempclosure>. Avoid compromised locations.
- **You are required to wear a mask at all times in class.** This session of FYS 129 is offered in a face-to-face mode.
- **Do not come to class if you are sick.** Absence due to illness of any kind is an excused absence.
- **Disinfect your seating area when you arrive.** Wipes will be provided in the classroom. You are asked to sit in the same seat every class period, for purposes of contact tracing.
- **Wait to Enter the Classroom until all the students in the previous class have left.**

**A. Course Details**

FYS 129 The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation: Modern Traditions in Creative Music

This seminar examines both the motivations for and expressions of creativity in unconventional directions as present in freely improvised music. The first purpose of the course is to introduce students to the music and musicians of free improvisation, across and between genres, and artists including Derek Bailey, Pauline Oliveros, Keiji Haino, Peter Brötzmann, Anthony Braxton, Cecil Taylor, John Zorn, Nicole Mitchell and many others. The second purpose of the course is to think critically about what drives practitioners of free improvisation to abandon conventional expressions of creativity (and therefore all hopes of broad appeal and/or significant commercial gain) in exchange for an “undiluted” artistic vision in the cultural margin. We will also discuss relevant topics such as social forces that led to non-idiomatic improvisation, the esthetic limits of music, the development of an ear for “difficult” music, the validity of various measures of success or merit, where popularity is largely irrelevant, and the essential presence of failure in experimental art forms. Hands-on experimentation with idiophonic instruments is part of the course.

Meeting Place: Humanities and Social Sciences 61

Meeting Time: Thursday 11:30 am - 12:45 pm

Instructor: Prof. David Keffer, room 301 Ferris Hall, [dkeffer@utk.edu](mailto:dkeffer@utk.edu)

Course Website:

<http://utkstair.org/clausius/docs/fys129/index.html>

## **B. Course Objectives:**

At the conclusion of this course, the student should be able

1. to demonstrate an awareness of free improvisation and its notable practitioners
2. to discuss motivations for and evaluations of creativity outside conventional directions
3. to articulate the role of social tension in the generation of new forms of creative expression
4. to continue to the next semester at UTK in good academic standing

## **C. Grading Policy**

### **C.1. Attendance and Participation**

This course is graded based exclusively on attendance and participation. If a student has more than two (2) unexcused absences, they will not receive credit for the course. All illnesses are considered excused absences. Please let the instructor know when you are unable to attend class for any reason. **DO NOT COME TO CLASS IF YOU ARE SICK!**

### **C.2. Homework**

- Students have one hour of listening homework each week.
- The location of the music files is given on the password-protected blackboard website.
- Student discussion leaders will prepare talking points for the week in which they are leading the discussion.

## **D. Getting Help**

The best way to contact the instructor is via email.

- Any questions regarding course content, grading of homeworks or any other topic should be sent via email to the Instructor.
- To guarantee that the email is read promptly, make the subject of the email “FYS 129” Emails with the subject “Help Me!” or similar subjects are identified as spam and deleted without being opened.

## **E. Course Schedule:**

The schedule for this course is provided in a separate document located at

<http://utkstair.org/clausius/docs/fys129/text/schedule.html>

## **F. Copyright Information:**

The Instructor and the University of Tennessee are committed to upholding copyright law. As a student enrolled in this music class, you may be provided with access to copyrighted music or texts that are directly related to the content of this course. It is our expectation that you will utilize these materials during the course of the semester that you are enrolled in this class, and will delete them after the close of the course. The purpose and character under which these materials are being provided to you is for nonprofit educational purposes only.