

sample assignment for 40,000 Years of Music Technology for use with Deirdre Loughridge, *Bone Flute to Auto-Tune* (University of Chicago Press 2026) and [sample syllabus for general course](#)

“An artist's relationship with tools, and the effects of changes in the tools themselves or development of skill and comfort level with those tools has a great impact on the work.”
-Pamela Z, “A Tool is a Tool” (1998)

Assignment #2: Analysis of a Musical Tool

In this course we have been (and will continue to be) considering how design features of music technologies reflect values (musical, cultural, and ethical), and relate to the music made with them. In your first assignment (the museum exhibit), you assembled a collection of instruments and focused on what we could learn by considering them together. Now, we will focus in on what we can learn by examining *one* instrument/technology – its design features, how it is used, what people say about it.

For this written assignment, you will investigate uses of a musical instrument/technology to develop a thesis regarding the relationship of the tool to the music made with it and/or the values it reflects. The tool you select should be one that we are not studying in this class, or for which you can identify features and uses other than the ones covered in class or the *Bone Flute to Auto-tune* book. For your selected tool, you can think very generally about wanting to understand: why do people use this tool? Why do they do what they do with it? But from the many ways in which one could approach answering such questions, for this paper we want to focus on features of the tool, and what music people make with it.

From Assignment 1, you know how to find basic information about an instrument's history and construction. For this assignment, you want to get into what people actually do with the tool. There is no better way to do this than to hear from the people who play/use the technology, and listen closely to the music they make! So for this assignment, YouTube is a great resource. Interviews, documentaries, tutorials, performances – look for people using, and talking about using the tool. Questions to ask yourself as you do this research include:

- What are the affordances and constraints of the tool?
- What does it make easier/more convenient, or more difficult/inconvenient?
- What are basic features of the instrument's sound?
- What are the features of a virtuosic performance?
- What challenges do performers/users of the tool talk about?
- How do people describe the appeal of the instrument, or what is great about it?
- In what contexts does the tool thrive?

Basic stipulations for this assignment:

- Your evidence should include specific musical features from at least two different audio or video performances, discussed with reference to their timestamps
- Your evidence should include at least two relevant quotes from users of the tool speaking about it themselves that you've found and selected from a primary source (ex. from an extended interview, a tutorial video, etc.)
- Cite any material that you quote, paraphrase, or otherwise make use of in your paper, as before following the citation guidelines from the [Chicago Manual of Style](#). For any quote from a video or audio, include the timestamp at which the quote occurs.
- Audio/video examples with listening notes and thesis ideas due by date/time (5% of grade)
- Final paper of about 1000-1250 words due by date/time (10% of grade)

Ok, this is sounding cool – but what exactly am I supposed to do? Read on!

The final paper will be the product of your direct and thoughtful engagement with the musical tool you have chosen. In it, you will present an argument about the tool – i.e. have a thesis and support that thesis with evidence (including musical examples and primary source quotes).

The typical structure for this kind of paper (from Sara Gross Ceballos, used here with thanks):

- An **introduction** that draws your reader into the paper and prepares them for your **thesis**, which appears at the end of the first paragraph.
- A **thesis** that is a sentence or two that clearly answers the central question of your paper and how you plan to support your answer. It should be contestable (meaning that your reader will be able to respond “I agree” or “I disagree”) and supportable by evidence. It should also provide a “road map” for the rest of your paper by listing the evidence you will use to support it in the order that it will appear in your paper.
- Support for the thesis organized in discrete **body paragraphs** or sets of paragraphs. Each paragraph should be organized around one piece (or similar pieces) of evidence and have a topic sentence that points back to your thesis. The paragraphs should flow logically from one to the other and serve as an orchestrated defense of your thesis; they should follow the order laid out in your thesis “road map”. Transitions between paragraphs should signpost the path of your argument (where you are in the “road map”) and how supporting details relate to one another.
- A **conclusion** that brings the reader back to the original thesis with a restatement of your thesis, *not* word-for-word. Then move on to reflect on the broader implications of what you have just argued.
- Add a title for the paper at the end of the writing process that gives your reader a sense of your thesis in a few words.

Now, the matter of the thesis. What might constitute a thesis for this kind of paper? Well, we can think about instruments we have covered (or are coming up in *Bone Flute to Auto-tune*) for some examples:

Violin – something we touched on: Due to the construction of the instrument, it’s extremely difficult to play multiple notes simultaneously and in tune. For precisely this reason, playing multiple notes at once is a common feature of virtuosic performance of the instrument, as seen in the music....

TouchKeys – we saw their design for continuous expressive control; what are people doing with them in practice? A paper could demonstrate whether TouchKeys are being used as anticipated by the designers, whether users are finding accidental affordances, and/or why they are or aren’t catching on with musicians. Other tools where you can compare their marketing with their use in practice would lend themselves to similar analysis.

Accordion – in the course we’re focusing on musical examples of how the instrument was transformed to fit local conditions and traditions, but you could instead look for highly expressive accordion music to support an argument like: This instrument is often maligned as corny, but is in fact capable of great expressivity thanks to x feature(s), and as demonstrated in the music of y...