SCA Music Program FAQs

Q: How is SFU’s music program different from a typical music program?

A: SFU’s music program is a creation-based program. Rather than rooted in instrumental performance, our foundation is in creative composition. This can mean composing for instruments, electronics, instruments combined with electronics, making pieces for other musicians to perform, creating your own unique performances, building original instruments, making sound installations, creating music with theatre, dance, or film, etc.

Q: My high-school doesn’t teach composition, should I bother? Or I’ve never composed, but I want to. Do I have a chance?

A: Absolutely! Creative composers come from a wide range of backgrounds in music, and most don’t start out composing early on. Even if you’ve never written music, if you have a genuine creative curiosity and a desire to explore new approaches to working with music and sound, you can thrive in our program. Please tell us as much as possible about your musical interests, and the ways you’ve been involved in music so far (whether it’s been learning an instrument, playing in a band, or making tracks in your bedroom).

Q: Is this a pop / classical / folk / jazz music program? Is this the right program for me if I want to specialize in one of these genres? What kind of music do people make at SFU?

A: We strongly encourage prospective students to spend time checking out our student alumni [on the music area webpage] for an impression of the range of music our students create. While many of our students have backgrounds in genre-based music (like jazz, folk, classical, techno, etc) our program does not cater to specialising in fixed-genre work. Rather, our students are encouraged to question many of these boundaries and develop their own rigorously unique approach to creative music-making. Students who are certain they want to work in a defined genre (ie. to be a jazz musician or techno musician, specifically) are encouraged to consider schools who focus on that particular style of training.

Q: What does being part of an interdisciplinary program actually mean?

A: As an interdisciplinary program, we foster collaborative work with artists in other areas (visual arts, dance, film, theatre, production and design). All our undergraduates take an interdisciplinary studio class that is mixed between students from all of these art forms. Students are supported in this class to create original, collaborative projects that reflect a unique exchange between all artists involved (one form does not simply function as accompaniment in service to another). This is an active part of our faculty’s own artistic practices, and we encourage our students to develop an awareness of the
work and conversations in different art forms and to engage in deeply fruitful exchanges of these ideas across disciplines. Students are invited in most studio (creative project-based) classes to work either independently, or in such collaborative models as they desire. Additionally, while all undergraduate students study the histories and cultural contexts of their own discipline, they also take courses that focus on the practices and traditions of other disciplines.

Q: Is this a film music program? How about video game music?

A: No, this is not a film music program. Film music programs typically provide technical training specific to the workflow of the mainstream film industry. We do support artistic collaboration that can involve composers and film-makers in an artistic context in which artists work together in co-creative roles. Many of our students end up creating music with filmmakers in this context. However, our focus is on cultivating independent musicians and artists, versus industry-based practitioners. The same applies to video game music. While students are welcome to explore collaborative projects along these avenues, we do not provide technical training specific to the video game industry.

Q: Will electroacoustic music teach me to be a sound engineer or producer?

A: Like all of our project-based studio courses, the electroacoustic courses are designed to support developing a creative practice as an independent musician. While students are given the foundations to develop their own eclectic toolkit, none of our courses focus primarily on technical training for a particular trade (like sound production or engineering). While some of our students do this work on the side as complementary to their original work, our electroacoustic courses will not train you to become a sound engineer or producer.

Q: Can I excel in this program if I don’t read notated music?

A: Yes! There are many rigorous ways of creating music that don’t require working with notation, and we support a full array of these practices. Likewise, many students who begin with no experience reading music end up developing fluency with notation as part of their work. There is room for many different avenues within our program.

Q: Can I excel in this program if I don’t have any background in electronic music?

A: Absolutely! We welcome students of all musical backgrounds with a desire to explore new approaches to working with music and sound. You don’t have to use electronics at all if you don’t want to, and if you want to learn how to use them, you can start here regardless of experience!
Q: I notice a lot of talk about collaboration, do I only get to compose for Film or Dance?

A: No. While all of our students are exposed to collaboration through the interdisciplinary studio class, you are fully welcome to cultivate an independent practice if that’s what you prefer.

Q: What instrument do I need to come with? I don’t play piano but I have a guitar? Voice?

A: While many of our students will find their former instrumental or vocal training useful, there are no requirements to be trained on a particular instrument. Some of our students have never studied an instrument.

Q: Do I have to audition?

A: You don’t have to audition, but you do have to supply a full application and students who are shortlisted for the program must attend an interview (this can be done over the phone or by teleconferencing for students who cannot attend in person). As our program is designed to support a particular model of creative musician, the interview determines if you and the program are a good fit.

Q: Can I take instrument lessons at SFU?

A: No, we do not provide any instrument lessons at SFU. Some of our students choose to continue instrument lessons privately, arranged on their own outside of school.

Q: What level of RCM do I need? Or I have RCM level 10 — do I go into 3rd year?

A: RCM is not required for our program, nor does it enable you to skip ahead. While many different backgrounds in musical training can be useful for our incoming students, the skills and knowledge we cover in our introductory courses are in no way similar to RCM training.

Q: How big is the ensemble we compose for?

A: The yearly Ensemble in Residence and visiting ensembles brought in for student projects vary in size, but are generally chamber-sized groups (4-6 players at a time). Many of our students succeed in pursuing opportunities to write for larger ensembles through outside workshops, readings, and calls for scores. Many of our faculty compose for larger ensembles and can provide support for such projects where desired. However, contact with large-scale ensembles or orchestras is not facilitated directly through our program.
Q: Do I get to make musebots?

A: A number of our students end up building their own instruments, electronics, or other unique performance tools. There is no limit to what you can dream up as a project, and the faculty offer a range of skills and experience to support this.

Q: Do you have a recording studio where I can record my band?

A: We do not have a commercial recording studio. Although we do have spaces in which individuals or 2-3 musicians can be recorded, these are not sound proofed. Nor do we have the standard recording studio equipment to record ensembles.

Q: What kind of gear will I have access to?

A: We attempt to provide an environment which may be similar to when a student graduates; in other words, we provide affordable equipment that is readily available. For example, you would have access to standard microphones, ZOOM recorders, small mixers, a variety of USB controllers, Arduino kits, a lab of iMac computers with Ableton Live, Logic, MaxMSP. Most of our students end up using their own laptops.

Q: How much time do I spend with profs?

A: Our program features generally small class sizes and all studio classes are taught by faculty who are professionally active on an international scale. Many studio classes feature tutorials taught by these same faculty, in which original work is discussed on a weekly basis in small groups (no more than 4 students per session). This offers many opportunities for close contact with professors. Students may also request private directed studies with professors in the case of highly original projects that fall outside the focus of a regular class.

Q: Will my work be performed?

A: Each term (fall + spring) a Music + Sound Festival features original student works. Not all students will have work included every term, but most students will find regular opportunities for involvement in these performances. A number of other student-initiated projects and shows (both on and off campus) add to these opportunities. Motivated students will find no shortage of opportunities to share their work publicly or with their peers.