



Writing About Music

The chief purpose of *First Nights* is to show you how music can enrich your life. In *First Nights*, you will examine several major musical works, including Handel's *Messiah* and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. You will also read accounts of those who attended those first performances, for when we think about listeners of the past, we see how they are like us and how they are different, and we come to know more about ourselves.

In section meetings and papers you will be asked to make observations about music. Some of these will be objective—what actually happens in the music, how many people are playing, and so on. But more important in some ways are our own reactions to what we hear. We need to be able to make clear statements in both areas, and to distinguish between them.

And so we need to use words in order to communicate about music. That can seem perverse, since music by its very nature communicates

without words. And yet it is only in formulating our own view that we know and understand it, and we come away with a confidence and enthusiasm in dealing with this music and other music like it. Writing about music allows us to approach the inexpressible thing that makes a piece beautiful or powerful or difficult to grasp.

Writing about music is in some ways like writing about anything else: you need interesting ideas, clear presentation, good organization. But writing about music also entails listening, formulating observations in words, and shaping those observations into a form that communicates your opinions about music. Together, "Listening to Music" (the guide in your source-pack) and this pamphlet on writing about music aim to help you through these steps. We expect that they will help newcomers to music feel at home with an art of great beauty and power.

by Thomas Forrest Kelly

I carry my thoughts about with me for a long time, often for a very long time, before writing them down.... I change many things, discard others, and try again and again until I am satisfied; then, in my head, I begin to elaborate the work in its breadth, its narrowness, its height, its depth, and because I am aware of what I want to do, the underlying idea never deserts me. It rises, it grows, I hear and see the image in front of me from every angle, as if it had been cast like a sculpture, and only the labor of writing it down remains....

— LUDWIG VON BEETHOVEN

FROM A WRITTEN CONVERSATION WITH LOUIS SCHLOSSER (1822 OR 1823)

Writing First Nights Assignments

Two paper assignments in *First Nights* allow you to experience first-hand how thinking and writing about music enhances your appreciation of it. Each assignment asks you to delve deeply into the music itself, to discern how the music establishes its ideas. Each asks you to pay attention to the music's context, to understand the way cultural expectations affect how we hear and appreciate music. The assignments themselves are rather different: one is a series of four exercises in close analysis, typical of the kind of writing scholars do; the other is a review, typical of popular writing about music. But both require the same techniques of careful observation and analysis, techniques that will help you establish a relationship with the music that is deeper and more satisfying than that experienced by a casual listener. See the *First Nights* syllabus for the assignments.

Before You Start Writing

Writing about music, like writing about any subject, takes place in stages. “Listening to Music,” the guide included in your sourcepack, details a procedure that will help you know the music well enough to write about it for your *First Nights* papers. In brief, prior to developing the thesis and planning the structure of an essay, you need to *observe* and *analyze* the music.

Observe

What are your first impressions of the music? Try to arrive at a set of descriptive adjectives rather than value judgments (“disjointed” or “unsettling” rather than “ugly” or “confusing”). What is the structure of the piece you will write about? When and how does the music repeat, recur over longer spans of time, emphasize certain notes or passages? What is the larger form of the music, its arrangement into discrete sections?

Review “Listening to Music,” chapter 2

Analyze

What are the distinguishing features of the music—is it loud or soft, fast or slow, played by multiple instruments or a single voice? Is it rhythmically simple or complex? Does the melody change? And so on. What are the main ideas in the music or in the section of the piece you plan to write about? Typically, these are closely related to your first impressions of the music, and to the answers you arrived at in analyzing the music. Analyzing the music provides you with a rationale for your first impressions and is the first step toward developing a plausible thesis.

Review “Listening to Music,” chapter 3

Special Features of Writing About Music

You don't have to be an expert in music to write a good paper about it. In fact, you don't even have to be able to read music. You just have to be able to listen closely, analyze the music, and arrive at an interpretation. So in many respects, strong essays about music are like the best essays about anything. They have a credible and interesting main idea, a coherent structure, convincing evidence, and an elegant style. The best papers about music also feature a unique combination of precise attention to musical detail and judicious use of metaphor. The detail allows a reader to "locate" a moment in the music without reference to a score (an essay about literature could simply cite a page number); the metaphor approximates, in words, ideas that are expressed in another medium of communication altogether, the language of music.

Technical vs. Lay Language

Though it can be daunting to the neophyte, technical vocabulary allows writers to describe music's subtleties precisely. Using some technical language may thus be necessary for the sake of clarity. And if you're familiar with music, you may find it natural to use such language and make reference to the score. But that's not the only choice you have. If you're new to music, can't read a score, or are writing for a general audience, simply describe the evidence of your ears.

In the following sentences from an article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "Misunderstanding Gershwin," writer David Schiff discusses Chopin's influence on George Gershwin. Note the smooth mix of **lay** and **technical** language. (If you were writing this paragraph and couldn't read a score, you might dispense with the reference to specific pitches.)

Gershwin may have taken some of his most distinctive musical touches from Chopin's Prelude in E minor, one of the first pieces of real music that piano students encounter. Chopin's *melody* emphasizes numerous repetitions of the same *pitch*—four times on *B*, then four times on *A*, then down to *G-sharp*. Each time a note is repeated, the *harmony* under it changes; while the melody reiterates pitches, the *bass line* **slithers downward** *chromatically*, making the melodic notes sound ever more **intense**.

Metaphor

Good writing about music almost always employs metaphorical language, which can convey the essence of a musical passage far better than technical description alone. The paragraph above helps you imagine the chromatic bass line in a Chopin piece by suggesting that it "slithers." Metaphor brings us closer to conveying the expressive quality of a piece of music than technical description alone.

Well-chosen metaphors and other extra-musical associations convey meaning that technical terms alone cannot. Consider the example below:

The triplets in the accompaniment gently animate the melodic line, like soft flakes drifting through a still winter landscape.

It's easy to imagine the snowflakes as the moving elements that "animate" the landscape, just as the triplets animate a relatively static melodic line. The simile thus acts as a kind of evidence for a claim. Poorly-chosen metaphors, however, detract from your efforts to communicate. Consider the following example: "Hearing this piece is like walking through deep snow on a sunny morning." This simile is less successful. It suggests that the music is slushy and fluid, or that listening to it is hard work. This simile describes the writer's feeling rather than making clear the connection between image and music. Valid though feelings are, they are not concrete evidence. If you fail to make clear the connection between image and music, you risk alienating your readers.

Assignment 1: Exercises in Close Analysis

Strategies for Writing the Papers in Assignment I

This first assignment is a series of four exercises that ask you to analyze one or more musical passages for both aural features and cultural significance. The four short papers are short, focused exercises on specific types of writing about music, such as text-music relations, form and musical meaning. You will need to analyze a discrete section of music (either assigned or one you select), understand how the music works, and describe briefly your (or some other/historical listener's) experience of the music. The goal in these short papers is to practice various types of music writing, and you should be careful that you do not try to take on every potential subtopic or tangent that might present itself. You do have only 250-500 words.

The four topics build on each other in the skills they are meant to develop. While the specific topics may change or be adjusted during the semester, the goals of each are as follows:

Paper One: In the song "The people that walked in darkness" from Handel's *Messiah*, how does the music relate to the words? How is the music independent of the words? You should concentrate on just this one piece, providing a close reading of it and proffering one clear idea. Paper One is an important diagnostic tool for your instructor. It also allows you to examine the relationship between music and text, which is an important theme in this course.

Paper Two: Give an opinion, from the point of view of an imaginary listener in 1824, on the novelties of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and their effectiveness. Paper Two builds on Paper One in that it continues the examination of the relationship between music and text. Here, however, you will expand your focus to consider other primary and secondary sources, particularly those about what musical traditions people in 1824 were used to hearing. Your close reading of passages from the Ninth should be in the service of some larger aspect of the structure of the music, text, or form.

Paper Three: Describe the musical structure of the second movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (use one or more diagrams if you wish). Within this broader expanse of time there are more musical aspects to discuss, and you will need to choose what to include. Here we move away from the idea of text but continue still with the idea of larger structure.

Paper Four: Describe the various musical elements in the passage of *Le sacre du printemps* from Rehearsal Number 86 (fourth measure of page 76) to Rehearsal Number 89. Describe the various musical elements and show how they interact. Feel free to use diagrams and charts if you wish. This exercise will allow you to give careful detailed attention to a complex musical passage. It should make you proud of what you've achieved in your listening and writing skills, and prepare you for the final paper in which similar careful listening and description will be an important part.

To write your papers, you'll need to...

Define your interest. What interests you most in the assigned or selected passage? Is there a surprise, a problem, a curious repetition, a particularly effective (or seemingly unsatisfying) technique or idea? Locating something that interests you but that you can't explain simply is the first step toward a thesis or overarching idea.

Analyze the music. What specific features of the music account for the interest you've defined for yourself? How do melody, harmony, texture, rhythm, dynamics—and other elements—combine to achieve the effect that most interests you? Gathering these details is the first step toward developing convincing evidence for your thesis or idea.

Contextualize the music, where appropriate. What relationship do you posit between your interpretation of the music and the interpretation of the audience at the premiere? How does your claim about the music connect (or contrast) with the ideas of its first audience?

The best papers will propose a thesis or, in the case of these smaller papers, an overarching idea about the music that is true but arguable (it is not self-evidently true; it must be proven), address the likely counter-arguments, show how the musical evidence supports the essay's claims, use appropriate technical and metaphorical language, and cite sources correctly. The best papers will also substantiate their claims about how the interpretations of the first audience differ from yours (or interestingly dovetail with them) by referring specifically to documents in the sourcepack or textbook.

Assignment 2: Review of a New Work

Strategies for Writing Assignment 2

In Assignment 2, you will review the world premiere of a work of music. Writing the review of a new work means straddling the divide between journalistic writing (reporting on what you've heard) and academic writing (analyzing the material). Your task will be to understand the work—to determine what its main musical idea is and to evaluate its methods of developing that idea. How well does the composition achieve its aims? What functions do its allusions to other works play? Are its departures from formal conventions of classical music consistent? Does it maintain musical coherence? These are the questions you'll be addressing in your second paper assignment. They are intrinsically contextual questions about how and why a piece has been constructed in the way you hear it, and how it compares to the work that came before. Assignment 2 builds on the work of close analysis that you did in Assignment 1.

Judge the work. “Judgment” is a tricky word, easily confused with “opinion.” Opinion is personal and largely independent of hard evidence. Judgment is authoritative, based on evidence, experience, comparison. The question of judgment is particularly important when you're reviewing new music, which may initially confuse or irritate a listener unfamiliar with modern composition. Your *opinion* might be “it's ugly; I didn't like it.” But your *judgment* should take into account what the music is striving for. Don't let your unfamiliarity with certain musical strategies devolve into condemnation; instead, try to understand the “how” and the “why” of the music, the internal logic of the composition. For this reason, although it's easy to write a negative opinion piece, it's much harder to write a successful negative review. For a negative judgment to be credible, it must demonstrate that the writer understands the aims of a piece and can show how the music fails to meet those aims.

Introduce the music. Take special care to familiarize your reader with the unfamiliar details of a new work of music. Your introduction is the logical site for many of these details. Who is the composer? What is the scope of the composition? Is there an accompanying text? What are the circumstances of the performance? (Who are the musicians, where and when did the performance take place, in what context?) How you distribute this information—and what information you include—will be up to you, and will to some degree be determined by your thesis. But when you make decisions about what details to include at the beginning of an essay and what to save for later, remember that you're describing new music, that your readers won't have stores of knowledge about it, and that they'll need some context right away to prevent confusion.

Maintain an appropriate tone. To make your review credible to your readers, it will be critical to establish a respectful and analytical tone. Readers will not trust a review that appears less than objective. Be generous with your assessment of the music, and remember that you must always back up your judgment with musical evidence, as you did in Assignment 1.

In addition to having all the elements of any good essay, the best reviews will convincingly balance an objective account of the music and the performance with a judgment of the composition's success at meeting its own goals. These reviews, in other words, take into account the music's cultural context: how successfully the piece draws on or departs from musical conventions, why it makes these connections or disjunctions, and what the response of the audience might say about the music itself. And though the best reviews may track the structure of the music, they will be driven by ideas rather than by the chronology of the music alone.

Music and Writing Resources

The *First Nights* Website

First Nights students should find useful an extensive website created for the class:

[WWW.COURSES.FAS.HARVARD.EDU/~LAB51]

This site contains background images and text for each of the performances the course examines, access to the music itself, close analyses of moments in the music linked to the on-line glossary (see below), and listening notes for each major piece. It also contains links to other useful websites.

The “Writing About Music” Website

You can hear the musical examples referenced in “Listening to Music” on a website called “Writing About Music”:

[WWW.COURSES.FAS.HARVARD.EDU/~WAM]

The site is meant for *First Nights* students only and hence is password-protected. Check with your TF for this semester’s username and password.

The On-Line Music Glossary

A link from the *First Nights* home page, as well as bold-faced blue electronic links in the “Writing About Music” website, will take you to an on-line music glossary that explains musical concepts and frequently provide listening examples. This glossary will help you distinguish between “rhythm” and “beat,” understand “texture,” define “register,” and so on. Using the username and password for the “Writing About Music” site, you may access this glossary independently at:

[WWW.COURSES.FAS.HARVARD.EDU/~GLOSSARY]

(Please be aware that some of the links on this site are broken.)

The Writing Center

Located on the “garden level” of the Barker Center, the Writing Center offers individual assistance to students who would like to work closely with trained undergraduate tutors on structure, focus and clarity of essays, research papers, and theses. Students may access the Writing Center website to make an appointment

[WWW.FAS.HARVARD.EDU/~WRICNTR]

or call for more information (5-1655). The Writing Center also provides excellent handouts on many aspects of writing academic essays: developing a thesis, planning an essay’s structure, introducing and concluding, revising and more.

Writing with Sources

Written by Gordon Harvey, Associate Director of Expository Writing, this short guide offers students information in integrating sources into a paper, deciding when—and when not—to cite, choosing a citation style, and avoiding plagiarism. To obtain a copy online, visit the Expos website:

[WWW.FAS.HARVARD.EDU/~EXPOS/SOURCES]

