

Writing about Music: A Guide to Writing in A & I 24

Harvard College Program
in General Education
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Harvard University



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Introduction: 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 about ourselves.

In section meetings and papers you will be asked to make arguments based on your 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 is our ability to articulate and explain our own reactions to what we hear. We need to be able to make clear statements about both what we hear and how we react, and to distinguish between those kinds of statements.

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 a convincing argument, interesting ideas, clear presentation, and thoughtful 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 sourcepack) 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.



Part I: Some Special Features of Writing About Music

You don't have to be an expert in music to write a good paper about it. You certainly don't have to be able to read music. You just have to be able to listen closely, analyze the music, and arrive at a view, an opinion, an interpretation of the music's meaning. So in many respects, strong essays about music are like the best essays about anything. They have a plausible and interesting main argument, 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. **Don't use technical language for the sake of using it. Use it only when it helps you to make a point.**

In the following sentences from an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "Misunderstanding Gershwin," writer David Schiff discusses Frédéric Chopin's influence on George Gershwin. Note the smooth mix of **lay (bolded in the examples below)** and *technical (italicized in the examples below)* 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 this example:

The theme in the violins sputters and spits like a trick candle on a birthday cake, struggling to remind the listener of its former brilliance right up until the moment when the entire orchestra douses it for good with a fortissimo chord.

By comparing the violins' stopping and starting to the flickering light of a trick candle, the writer illustrates the frustrating incompleteness of an otherwise robust theme. The simile thus could act to bolster a larger claim or interpretation — about nostalgia, perhaps, or about the importance of this theme in the context of the larger piece. But poorly-chosen metaphors — or those that lack specific musical details — detract from your efforts to communicate convincingly about music. Consider the following example: “Hearing this violin theme is both funny and sad, like watching someone trying to blow out a trick candle.” This simile is unsuccessful because it lacks concrete connections between images and specific musical events. Valid though the writer's feelings are (here, a feeling of amusement), they do not serve as concrete evidence. If you fail to make clear the connection between image and music, you risk alienating your readers and weakening your argument.



Part II: Major Writing Assignments

Two paper assignments in *First Nights* will allow you to experience first-hand how thinking and writing about music enhance your appreciation of it. Each paper asks you to make an argument that is based primarily on specific, concrete musical details. Each asks you to pay attention to the music's context, to understand the way cultural expectations affect how we hear and appreciate music. 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.

Your weekly section assignments will give you practice in developing arguments and discussing musical details so that you can complete the papers successfully.

See the *First Nights* syllabus for the two paper assignments. Below is some general advice for approaching these papers. Specific suggestions for the second assignment appear at the end of this section.

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**

Pay attention to your first impressions. There are a number of questions you could ask yourself at this stage, so focus on what strikes you most about the music or a section of the music. When you notice yourself responding a certain way, what is happening in the music that seems to cause that reaction? Here are some examples of areas you might pay special attention to: Are there sudden increases or decreases in volume (dynamics)? Does a tune seem to switch from one instrument to another, or from one group to another? How does the music seem to be structured — are there several different sections? Can you count along with the music? Are certain notes or passages repeated over and over again? Does something interesting happen when a particular word is sung? By listening repeatedly and focusing on a different attribute with each hearing, you can build a catalog of the various (and at first listen, mysterious) elements of a musical work or excerpt.

• **Analyze**

As you are making concrete observations about the music, you can begin to organize them meaningfully. If the melody changes from one instrument to another, if it gets louder or softer at a certain point, if something interesting happens when a particular word is sung, what does that mean for how we understand the work? How do aspects of the piece's form, or repetitions and variations of sections, contribute to the work's meaning or function? Analyzing the music gives you a framework in which to communicate about your first impressions and observations. It's the first step toward developing a plausible thesis or argument about the music.

Part II

Planning Your Paper

When it comes time to write your papers, remember that you can't discuss *every* detail, or even every *kind* of detail. You may, perhaps, limit yourself to arguing about the ways in which a few musical parameters (like melody, instrumentation, rhythm, dynamics, etc.) affect the piece's meaning or create a particular experience for the listener. And for the details you do discuss, you must decide whether it is most productive to describe them in chronological order, or in order of their importance. In general, it is best to avoid a play-by-play discussion of musical events. Ultimately, you will need to select, organize, and explain fully only those musical details that connect to your argument.

The best papers will propose a thesis or an overarching idea about the music, show how the musical evidence supports the essay's claims, use appropriate technical and metaphorical language, and refer to sources correctly. They will show an awareness of likely counterarguments and address them convincingly. The best papers will also make it clear that you have thought about how the interpretations of the first audience differ from yours (or interestingly dovetail with them) by referring specifically to historical materials.

Devising a strong thesis is both difficult and crucial to the success of your paper. Excellent theses constitute concise articulations of an idea that is plausible but arguable (it is not self-evidently true; it must be proven). Avoid obvious and/or inarguable statements, like "Beethoven's genius has manifested itself in the brilliant second movement of his 9th Symphony, ensuring its lasting popularity." This thesis forces a writer to quantify something extremely subjective (genius) and focuses on vague, similarly subjective value judgments. A better thesis would be, "By manipulating the conventions of sonata form in the second movement of his 9th Symphony, Beethoven attacks symphonic tradition – not destroying it, but adapting it to the needs of his time." That Beethoven "attacks" tradition is entirely plausible but not obviously true – one can imagine counterarguments that point to Beethoven's adherence to tradition in many aspects of his music. Another successful aspect of this thesis is the way it links its argument about tradition and innovation to a particular aspect of the music – form – thus paving the way for a paper that uses musical and historical details as its primary evidence in proving the main point. Here are a few more sample theses that accomplish the aforementioned goals:

Despite many instances in which Berlioz borrows from his other works, the coherence of the program in *Symphonie Fantastique* remains intact thanks to the thematic unity of the *idée fixe* and other recurring motives.

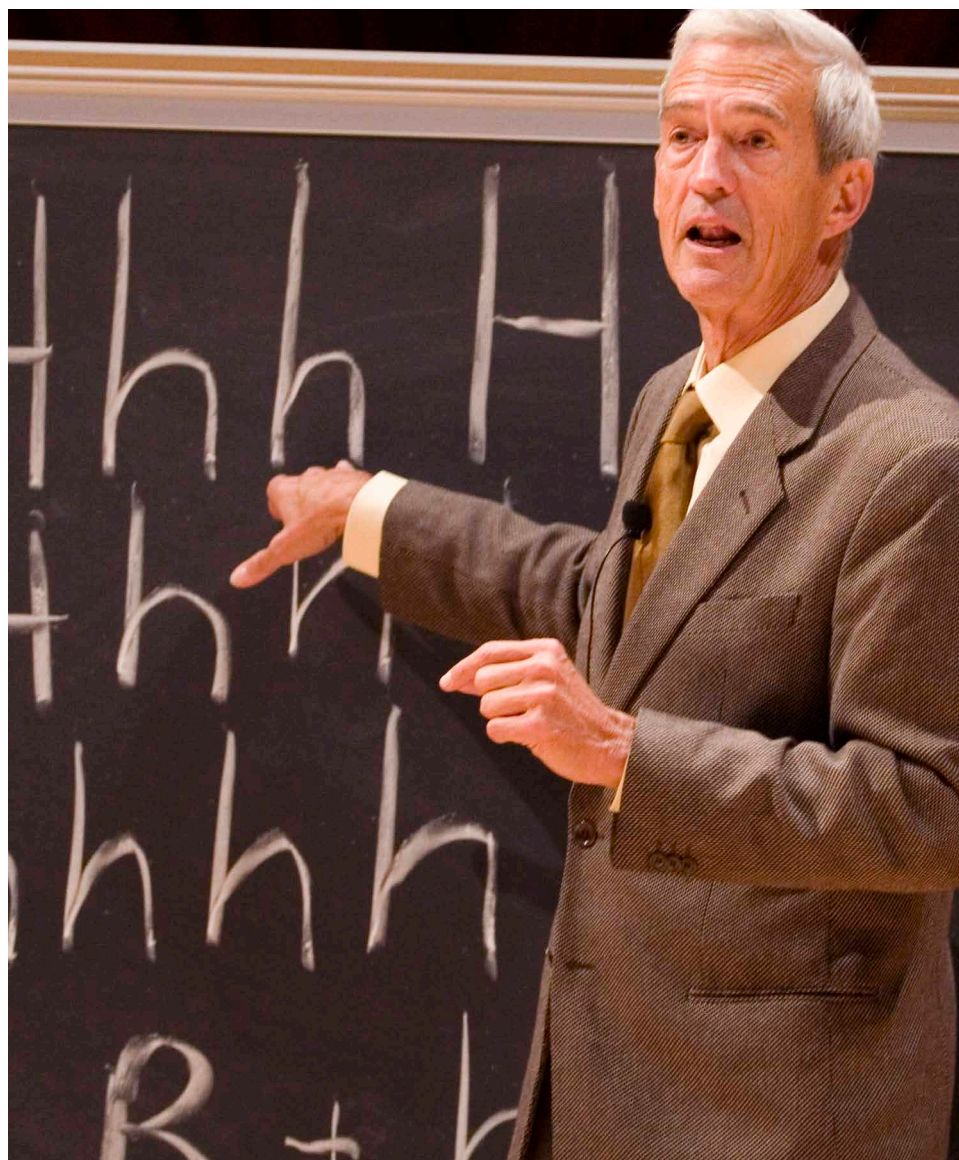
In Handel's *Messiah*, light and dark become musically-represented metaphors for heaven and hell.

Throughout *The Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky exploits the contrasting timbres of solo and ensemble playing to create an orchestral representation of the larger dramatic conflict in the ballet between individuality and collectivity.

Some Tips for the Final Paper

In the second paper, you will review the world premiere of a new 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). And of course, you will need to make sure to maintain an appropriate tone so that your readers know they can trust the information you provide. You will also need to introduce the basic background information that any reader needs to know (i.e., who is the composer, what are the circumstances of the premiere, who are the musicians, etc.).

Perhaps more challenging, you will need to fold these elements into a broader argument, so that the review doesn't read like a "laundry list" of facts and observations. In essence, you will marshal the details you find important in order to argue something about the significance of the piece. You will not simply claim that the piece or performance was "good" or "bad," or that you liked it or didn't; those opinions may be starting points, but ultimately, you will use musical evidence to dig deeper and make and support an arguable claim.



Music and Writing Resources

The First Nights Course site

First Nights students should find useful an extensive website created for the class. 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 online glossary, and listening notes for each major piece. It also contains links to other useful websites, including “Writing About Music.”

The Writing Center

The Writing Center offers individual assistance to students who would like to work closely with trained 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]

Harvard Guide to Using Sources

For this course you are not expected to do outside research, and you may rely on sources from within the course’s activities. Still, you need to be aware of norms involving how to integrate material from sources into a paper, and how to avoid plagiarism.

[usingsources.fas.harvard.edu]

The Goals of General Education

Harvard has long required that students take a set of courses outside of their concentration in order to ensure that their undergraduate education encompasses a broad range of topics and approaches. The Program in General Education seeks to connect in an explicit way what students learn in Harvard classrooms to life outside the ivied walls and beyond the college years. The material taught in general education courses is continuous with the material taught in the rest of the curriculum, but the approach is different. These courses aim not to draw students into a discipline, but to bring the disciplines into students' lives. The Program in General Education introduces students to subject matter and skills from across the University, and does so in ways that link the arts and sciences with the 21st century world that students will face and the lives they will lead after college.

Complementing the rest of the curriculum, this program aims to achieve four goals that link the undergraduate experience to the lives students will lead after Harvard:

- to prepare students for civic engagement;
- to teach students to understand themselves as products of, and participants in, traditions of art, ideas, and values;
- to enable students to respond critically and constructively to change;
- and to develop students' understanding of the ethical dimensions of what they say and do.

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