

**SPEAKING OF MUSIC:
HOW TO TALK AND WRITE ABOUT IT**

Fall 2016

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[email me](#)

[go to my website](#)

[read my blog on the future of classical music](#)

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[read the course overview](#)

[read today's *New York Times* music reviews](#)

[read my wife's reviews and blog in the Washington Post](#)

(This link takes you to everything Anne writes, including feature articles and news reports. You may have to browse a bit to find her concert reviews.)

Classwork and assignments

You'll find links here to all reading assignments, and also to the optional listening. You'll be able to do all these assignments online.

All reading and listening assignments should be done by the late they're listed under, so we can discuss them in that day's class. Which means that assignments listed for September 18 should be done by September 18. For other assignments — written assignments, for instance — I'll specify a due date.

This schedule might change, depending on how long some of our discussions take. Assignments might change, too. I'll e-mail all updates, including links to any assignments I add or change.

September 14

Introduction to this course (class discussion)

September 21

My own writing

Reading assignment:

Some of my music reviews, from the days when I was a pop and classical music critic. Because if I'm going to critique other people's writing in this course, you have a right to know what kind of writing I've done.

Classical reviews, from the *Wall Street Journal*:

[“Enigmatic Debut”](#)

[“Putting the Music First”](#)

“When the Solid Dissolves”

You’ll see that I added a long postlude when I put the last of these on the web. You don’t have to read this extra part unless you want to.

“Conduct(or) Unbecoming the Boston Symphony”

One pop review, from the late 1980s, when I was chief pop music critic for the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* (a daily paper that’s now defunct):

“Vintage Talent’s Pop Wine: Rocking Chair’s Got ‘Re, James B” (about Aretha Franklin)

One of my columns from the early 1980s, when I wrote for the *Village Voice*, which then was the leading weekly paper in New York. I specialized in new music:

“Cage Speaks Louder When the Street Gets Noisy”

September 28

Ways to write about music

Reading assignment:

E.M. Forster [writes about Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony](#) in his 1910 novel *Howard’s End*

Forster was one of the great novelists in 20th century Britain. In this excerpt from one of his books, a group of young people, ranging from their teens to their 20s, are at a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth. Some interesting things here, though not strictly relevant to this course, are (1) that the audience applauds between movements of the symphony, and (2) that younger people at a classical concert don’t seem at all unusual.

But what matters for this course is how the symphony is discussed. One of the characters tells a story, in her mind, about what the music means to her. I think this is a more subjective account of the music — more personal — than what we normally encounter these days. Do you or your friends talk about classical music this way? Does your teacher? Do conductors you’ve worked with?

Some people might think that what Forster writes is too simple — maybe not analytical enough — for a serious discussion of classical music. Or does it have something important to tell us, both about Beethoven and about what we can hear in a classical piece?

Two music reviews by Tom Johnson, my predecessor as new music columnist at the *Village Voice*:

“Charles Ives in Brooklyn”

optional listening: [Charles Ives’ The Unanswered Question](#), which Tom writes about in this review

“Yoko Ono’s Snow”

Tom, as you’ll see, didn’t write the way most music critics write. He doesn’t seem to be judging the concerts he hears. Instead, he tells stories about them. Of course he has his opinions, but they function as part of the story

And there’s something else unusual — the Yoko Ono piece is about the sound of snow, which many people would say wasn’t music at all. But Tom (who was strongly influenced by John Cage) thought it was just as much music as anything else.

Tom also says “I” a lot. He becomes a leading character in the stories he tells. Some people think this is wrong. Critics, these people think, should be strictly objective, and should focus on the music, not on themselves. Others might say that any critic’s opinion is of course a personal one, and that therefore it makes

sense to know what kind of person the critic is, because that affects their judgment.

But what do you think? Do you like the way Tom writes? Do you think the sound of snow is a legitimate subject for someone who writes about music?

(About Yoko Ono: You may know her name because she became a famous pop music figure. She married John Lennon, and has been blamed for the breakup of the Beatles, because the other members of the group didn't like her. But she was also a leading figure in conceptual art. That's a kind of art in which what's important is the thoughts a work of art might lead you to, rather than the physical form it takes. Which can mean that the work might just be words, and might not have any physical form at all. Do you run into art like this at Juilliard?)

A chapter from a book by Greil Marcus, perhaps the most distinguished of all rock critics. He goes into the heart of an early Van Morrison song, "Mystic Eyes." (Morrison, if you don't happen to know him, was one of the big rock stars of the 1960s. The song comes from the first album of his first band, Them. Greil's take on it comes from a book he wrote about Morrison, called *When That Rough God Goes Riding*.)

"Mystic Eyes" (1965)

Optional listening:

"Mystic Eyes"

I doubt you'll ever find anyone whose writing about music seems so personal. If you carefully read what Greil writes, maybe you'll agree with me about something I think is unusual. He describes his own thoughts and emotions as he listens to the song, but he describes them as if they were real events, as if they'd become part of the music.

Some people might think this is crazy, that Greil is destroying the boundary between an objective understanding of music, and subjective feelings about it. And yet when I listen to the song, I think Greil is exactly right about what happens. Which for me means that in his own special way he's completely objective, and by highlighting his feelings calls attention to real things in the music that anyone could hear.

What's your opinion? And what do you think about music writing that's as emotionally charged as this is?

Thomas Hampson Gives World Premiere with Prague Symphony; then to Israel, Salzburg and Santa Fe (press release from 21C Media Group, July 2012)

This is a press release from one of the leading classical music publicity companies, one that works with classical music superstars. It's a good example of how these releases are normally written. You might say that it's detailed and informative, telling you all you'd want to know about what Hampson is currently doing. Or you might think — as I'm afraid I do — that it's completely unreadable, a massive ocean of text, in which we're never told anything that might interest us as people, or as musicians. Such as what kind of person Thomas Hampson is, or how he makes music.

What's your opinion?

October 5

Music criticism: George Bernard Shaw's music reviews (written in London in the 1890s)

Reading assignment:

Compare two reviews, one by Shaw and the other by Anthony Tommasini, chief classical music critic of the *New York Times*.

Shaw, “[The Most Utter Failure Ever Achieved](#)” (about a new oratorio)

Tommasini, “[A Tale of Sex and Disdain in Wharton’s Berkshires](#)” (about a new opera)

The two reviews might seem very different. Tommasini’s seems very factual, very objective. Shaw’s review might seem almost crazy, because it’s so opinionated. As you’ll see, he dislikes the piece he’s reviewing so much that he says the composer should burn the score.

But you might also see some similarities. In both cases, the piece being reviewed is adapted from a literary work (if you don’t mind me calling the *Book of Job*, from the Bible, literary rather than religious). And both critics think the musical works aren’t as good as their literary source.

But they handle their opinions very differently. Both critics, for instance, say that the composers they’re reviewing have great professional skill. But Shaw doesn’t care about that. He just cuts to what he thinks is the chase. Is this oratorio anywhere near as good as the *Book of Job*? Tommasini is much nicer to the composer he’s reviewing. It’s good, he says, to see someone make a profession of writing operas. And it’s good that new operas are produced.

Which approach do you like better? Is Shaw unfair to the composer he reviews? (Sir Hubert Parry, a man important in his own time, even if he’s not much remembered now, except maybe by organists and British choral singers.) Or does Tommasini go too far in an attempt to be fair?

October 12

Music criticism: more Shaw

Reading assignment:

“[Municipal Bands and Opera Tricks](#)” (excerpt, about a performance of Verdi’s *Rigoletto*)

“[Herr Mottl’s Insight](#)” (about a German conductor of Shaw’s time, Felix Mottl)

Shaw might have been famous for his sometimes outrageous opinions. But in these reviews I think he shows striking insight. In the first one, he tells us, better than I’ve ever seen it done, what standard a *Rigoletto* performance should reach. And in the second, he notes many striking details — things other critics might never mention — about Mottl’s performances.

Do you agree? If you’ve read many classical music reviews, do you know other critics who write this way?

October 19

Music criticism: Virgil Thomson’s music reviews (written for the *New York Herald-Tribune* in the 1940s and ‘50s)

Reading assignment:

Compare [two reviews](#) of a Jascha Heifetz concert in 1940, one by Thomson and the other by Olin Downes, who back then was the chief music critic of the *New York Times*.

These reviews couldn’t be more different. Thomson doesn’t like Heifetz, and Downes just about worships him. Thomson writes almost like a sportswriter, in a friendly, colloquial way, while Downes takes a more lofty tone. (Or does he seem pompous?)

Which way of writing do you like better? And — putting your own view of Heifetz aside, if you have one — which review do you think people would be more likely to believe? (Of course, that might depend on who was reading them.)

Then read Thomson’s review of the Berg Violin Concerto:

“[Gloomy Masterpiece](#)”

This review is very favorable. But it raises fascinating questions about objectivity. Thomson certainly praises the piece. But do you think he really likes it? And if he doesn't, why do you think he writes such a favorable review?

October 26

More on Thomson

Reading assignment:

Read four Thomson reviews, of four pianists from his time.

[“Master of Distortion and Exaggeration”](#) (about Vladimir Horowitz)

[“Equalized Expressivity”](#) (about Artur Schnabel)

[“Dramatizing the Structure”](#) (about Clifford Curzon)

[“Warm Welcome”](#) (about Myra Hess)

I wonder if you'll agree with my idea of what Thomson is doing here. Seems to me that he approaches each pianist differently. Each one, to him, has some central thing in his or her playing, and he builds his review around what he thinks that is. Most other critics, I think, would give each pianist the same kind of judgment. They'd describe each performance of each piece, and say what they thought of it. Maybe, in the end, you as the reader would end up with some overall view of each pianist's playing. But Thomson starts with that.

Do you like that way of writing?

November 2

Press Releases

Assignment due next week, on November 11. Please write a review of music I'll put online. I'll email the links.

Reading assignment:

Read [my outline of how to write a music review](#). We'll discuss it in class. It might help you with your own review, the one you have to write for next week.

Three posts from my blog:

["Bad Press Releases"](#)

["A Bad Caramoor Press Release"](#)

["How to Write a Press Release"](#)

You already know that I don't like the standard way of writing press releases. I don't think it tells us anything that would make us care about an artist or a performance. And isn't that why you send out a press release — to make people care?

Do you agree with my criticism? And do you like the alternatives I proposed in the third of these blog posts, about how I think releases might be written?

Some good and bad press releases:

[Carnegie Hall](#)

[San Francisco Symphony 2007 season announcement](#)

[Young Concert Artists current season preview](#)

[Andrew Rangell](#)

[Michael Gordon's *Timber*](#)

Swans

Some of these press releases are the normal kind. But others are more expressive. Which ones did you enjoy reading, and which didn't you like? Not all the expressive ones are necessarily good.

Notice also that some of the more expressive press releases include graphics, while the more orthodox tend not to. Do you think graphics make a press release livelier and perhaps more appealing? Or do you think they make a release seem unprofessional, because it looks less serious?

November 9

Artist bios

First paper due. You'll write a review of music I'll put online.

Please [e-mail](mailto:greg@gregsandow.com) this and all other assignments to me at greg@gregsandow.com. Remember that I don't accept late assignments. If you're going to be late with your work, you absolutely must let me know in advance, and arrange another due date.

Assignment for next week, due November 16: prepare a short presentation — just five minutes long — about a piece you love, maybe something you yourself play (though you can choose something you don't play, if you want to).

I don't want you to write this presentation out in advance. If you're reading it when you give it, that might make it seem formal or stiff. You can make notes, but I want you to speak the presentation in your own way, freely and spontaneously.

Reading assignment:

Some orthodox bios:

[Afiara String Quartet](#)

[Yefim Bronfman](#)

[Anna Netrebko](#)

These orthodox bios — like orthodox press releases — don't say anything about the artists as people, or about what makes their performances distinctive. They do list innumerable honors, distinctions, and performances in important venues, with important orchestras and opera companies. Do you find that interesting to read?

Some less orthodox approaches:

[Anne Midgette](#) (my wife, from her blog)

[Robin Givhan](#) (Washington Post fashion critic. What I like here is the first sentence of her bio. Which you'll find on the top right of the webpage I've linked to.)

[William Eddins](#) (a conductor)

[Marc Ostrow](#) (a lawyer, who's done a lot of work in music)

These bios, to say the least, are highly personal. Do you like that? Do you think any of them go too far? Could you imagine writing your own bio this way?

November 16

Program Notes

Presentations due. You'll give yours in class, and we'll all discuss them.

Reading assignment:

Louis Biancolli, [liner note for Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony](#) (from a 1953 recording by the Boston Symphony, conducted by Charles Munch)

Very old-fashioned, very emotional. Do you like this approach?

Michael Steinberg, [program note for Beethoven's Fifth Symphony](#) (written for the New York Philharmonic)

Very scholarly, and very analytical. Would many people in the Philharmonic audience be able to understand what Steinberg is saying? And if the answer is no, why would the orchestra use this program note?

Greg Sandow, [program note for Beethoven's Missa Solemnis](#) (written for the Cleveland Orchestra)

I tried to write a program note that anyone could read, whether or not they have a classical music background. I wanted to make the piece come alive, and to give people reasons for listening to it. Do you think I succeeded?

And there's something else interesting. Franz Welser-Möst, the Cleveland Orchestra's music director (who conducted this performance), wanted his own views of the music included in what I wrote. I don't know if I've seen other artists doing this. Normally program notes reflect what the writer thinks, with the musicians not represented at all. But we're hearing the music as the musicians want it to go! So maybe we should know what they're trying to do. I have to say that I like Franz's approach. What do you think of it?

Anderson and Roe, [program note for their October 30 concert](#) at the National Gallery in Washington

November 23

No class. Thanksgiving week.

November 30

Rock criticism

No reading assignment. We'll listen in class to Elvis Presley's very first record, and find ways to talk about it. It sounds like a very simple song, but you might be surprised by what lies behind it.

December 7

Rock criticism

Second paper due. Please write your own bio, and write a brief program notes for a piece you perform. Or (if you're a composer) write a program note for a piece you've written.

Reading assignment:

From Nick Hornby's *Songbook*:

["Nelly Furtado: 'I'm Like a Bird'"](#)

optional: [listen to the song](#)

From *Stranded, Rock and Roll for a Desert Island* (a book in which rock critics pick the album they'd take to a desert island):

Lester Bangs, ["Astral Weeks"](#) (about a Van Morrison album)

optional: [listen to "Madame George"](#) (the song Bangs mainly talks about)

optional: [read the "Madame George" lyrics](#)

These essays — you'll see that they aren't really reviews — aren't at all like classical music writing. Nick Hornby (a British novelist) writes about a top-hit pop song, and says he loves music that's disposable, music you might forget a few months after falling in love with it. Would a classical critic say anything like that?

Or would a classical critic write— as Hornby does — about how a pop song got him to bond, if only for a moment, with people from a very different background?

Lester Bangs is so deeply moved by the music he's writing about that he begins and ends the piece in a kind of personal agony. Would classical critics bare their souls so deeply? Bangs also picks unusual details from the album to stress, and says he doesn't care to describe the whole thing. Would a classical critic do that?

December 14

Final discussion.