

SPEAKING OF MUSIC: HOW TO TALK AND WRITE ABOUT IT

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Why this course?

We're musicians, so we talk about music all the time. And so we might not think of this as a skill we can develop, something we can get better at. But you *can* develop this skill, and if you do...

It can help you as a musician

You can learn to describe pieces and performances you hear, so clearly that someone else almost feels like they were there.

You can learn to tell musicians you're working with how you want a passage to go, or why you do or don't like a piece. You can do this in a way that makes your feelings (and the reasons for them) crystal clear, and that shows respect for anyone who disagrees.

It can help you with your career

Why should people come to your performances? Why should anyone book you to give a concert? They'll do these things because they think they'll like the music you make.

But how do you make them think they'll like it? How do you get people interested in you, if they haven't heard you yet?

You can learn to tell people why they might like your work, in words that make sense to them, and that they'll believe.

What we do

First:

You'll find your assignments for this course on an [online class schedule](#). You should look at it each week, to see what's coming up next, what reading you have to do, or what other assignments you'll have. You'll find links to all your assignments, so you can do them all online.

In more detail:

Each week, we'll find words to describe some music we hear

I'll play all kinds of music in class, and we'll all do our best to describe how it sounds, and why we do or don't like it. You might be surprised at how hard this can be, if you want to give someone who hasn't heard the music a clear idea of what is. But we'll all get better at doing it (including me, because I never stop learning).

You'll have reading assignments:

Some of the reading assignments are music reviews:

Music critics find ways to describe music in words. We can learn from the good ones, and also from the bad ones, because they show us things to avoid. I know about music criticism because I used to be a critic, and because my wife, Anne Midgette, is one now. She's the classical music critic at one of the top newspapers in the U.S., the *Washington Post*.)

So we'll read some of my own writing, because if I'm going to teach you how to describe the music you hear, you have a right to see how I've done it.

Then we'll read reviews by two critics I admire. These are George Bernard Shaw (best known as a great playwright), who wrote in London during the 1890s, and Virgil Thomson, a leading American composer, who wrote in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. Of course these people wrote a long time ago. But, at least in my view, no one ever described music better, or did it in a more lively way.

We'll also read current reviews, which you'll choose yourselves. Each week one of you will choose a review, either something from the *New York Times* or one of my wife's reviews from the *Washington Post*. You'll print it out for all of us to read, and you'll lead us in critiquing it.

If you don't like something my wife wrote, if or you don't like my writing — yes, you can say so! There's no censorship in this class. You can say anything you want, and you're free to disagree with me.

Finally, we'll read some pop music reviews. Good pop critics talk about music in ways that classical critics don't. They talk about what the music means, and how it changes the lives of the people who hear it. Should classical critics do that?

We'll also read career-oriented writing — press releases, program notes, and artist biographies.

These are things you'll need for your careers. You'll either write them yourselves, or have them written for you. They've always been important, but right now they're even more so. First that's because this is an age of entrepreneurship, in which you may find yourself making your careers in unique new ways. Which means you'll have to find unique new ways to describe what you do.

And then this is a time when classical music is in crisis, when we need to find a new audience. To do this, we have to describe what we do in lively, interesting ways. (In the spring I teach a course about the future of classical music, called *Breaking Barriers: Classical Music in an Age of Pop*. In it we talk a lot about why we have to find a new audience, and how we can do it.)

Besides reading assignments, you'll have other kinds of work:

You'll give a short presentation in class about a piece that you love

These days, classical musicians talk to their audience. So we should practice doing it.

These presentations will be just five minutes long, and should be informal. I know not all of you will be comfortable doing this, but — as I've found every year — nearly everyone succeeds. Nearly everyone gives these talks in a personal, interesting way.

In a class discussion, you'll develop what's called your "elevator pitch" — what you can say to get someone interested in you, if you only have only a short time to do it

You might meet someone at a crowded party, someone you can talk to for only a short time, and who could be important to your career. Or — this really happens! — you might find yourself standing next to that person in an elevator. What do you say?

Your elevator pitch can help you whenever you promote yourself. It helps you focus on what's most important to you. And you can use that focus when you design a website, publicize a concert, talk to a potential manager, apply for a grant, raise money from a donor, or talk to someone about booking you to perform.

You'll write two short papers.

One will be a review of a concert you've been to, to give you practice at describing music at greater length than we do in class.

In the second paper, you'll try something very practical — writing your own bio, and writing a program note for a piece you love.

Because this isn't specifically a course about writing, I'll care more about the ideas you express than about your writing ability (especially if English isn't your first language). But I might point out ways in which your writing can improve. And if you'd like to learn to write better, I'll be happy to help.

You'll email your papers to me at greg@gregsandow.com. I won't accept late assignments, unless you've arranged with me in advance to change the due date.

How you're graded

Of course I'll read your papers. And I'll expect you to do all the reading assignments. When I call on you in class — and I will! — I'll expect you to have done the reading assignment for that date.

But the most important part of your grade will be based on class participation, on how you work at describing the music I'll play, and how you react to the writing we'll read.

I know that some students normally talk more than others. But that won't matter to me. I'll gently ask everyone to speak, and I'll encourage you if you're shy. You'll find I won't judge you. What I care about is how hard you work to get better at everything we do, at whatever level you've reached.

Important! Because class discussion is so central to what we do, there's no point in taking this course if you can't come to class regularly. If you miss more than three classes without my permission, your grade may well be affected. If you need to be absent for professional reasons, I might want to assign you extra work.

One last word:

I want this course to be fun. I'll try to surprise you with some of the music I bring to class.

And if past years are any guide, our class discussions might surprise all of us. Nothing is off limits, and no opinions are sacred, including my own.