

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

Fall 2021

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Class schedule and assignments

You'll find links here to all reading assignments, and also to optional listening. You'll be able to read and listen to everything online.

All reading assignments should be done by the date they're listed under, so we can discuss them in that day's class. Which means, for instance, that assignments listed for September 8 should be done by September 8. For other assignments — written assignments, for instance — I'll specify a due date.

You'll see that there's one class I haven't planned yet. And things already on this schedule might change, depending on how long some of our discussions take. Assignments might change, too. I'll email all updates, including links to any assignments I add or change.

About the questions I ask you here, in my comments on the assignments...you don't need to answer them in class, or even to yourself. They're just there to help you think about the things I've assigned.

September 1

Introduction to this course (class discussion)

September 8

My own writing

Reading assignment:

Some of my music reviews, from the days when I was a music critic, writing first about classical music, then about pop, and then about classical music again. Because (as I wrote in the course overview) if I'm going to critique other people's writing in this course, including yours, you have a right to know what my own writing was like.

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 this review online. You don’t have to read this extra part unless you want to.

“Conduct(or) Unbecoming the Boston Symphony”

Here, too, I added a postlude, but I’d suggest you read this one. My review was very controversial, and there were some striking reactions to it, which I discuss in the postlude I added.

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 out of business):

“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*, a weekly newspaper which no longer exists, but in past decades was important in New York. I specialized in new music:

“Cage Speaks Louder When the Street Gets Noisy”

September 15

Unusual ways to write about music

No other week in this course will have such a long description on this class schedule. This one is long because I’ve given you reading that touches on many kinds of music, involving musicians you might not know about. I wanted to give you some background on who these people were. And so you could get to know their music, I gave you some optional listening, and optional videos to watch. You don’t have to do this listening, or watch these videos. They’re there, along with the comments on who these musicians were, just in case you’re interested. If you like, you can just do the reading assignments, and not bother with anything else. Though I do think the listening and videos might interest you!

Reading assignment:

E.M. Forster [writes about Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony](#) in his 1910 novel *Howards 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, presumably in 1910, the year the novel was written. Some interesting things here, about what classical music was like in the past, are (1) that the 1910 audience applauds between movements of the symphony, and (2) that it doesn’t seem unusual, back then, for younger people to be at a classical concert (including a teenager who follows a score).

But what matters for this course is how the symphony is discussed. One of the characters in the novel tells a story, in her mind, about what’s going on in the piece. I think this is a more subjective account of the music — more personal — than what we normally encounter these days. Does what she thinks about the piece make sense to you? 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’ piece *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 he tells

And there’s something else unusual — the Yoko Ono review is about the sound of snow, which many people would say isn’t music at all. But Tom thought it was just as much music as anything else. In this he was strongly influenced by John Cage, who thought any sound could be music.

Tom also says “I” a lot, as I do in my reviews. 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 who they are as a person of course affects how they think about music.

But what do you think? Do you like the way Tom writes? Do you like his personal approach? 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, who for many people was the best-loved member of the Beatles, and she’s been blamed for the breakup of the group, because the other Beatles 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 evoke in you, rather than the physical form the art takes. Which can mean that the work might not have any physical form; it might, for instance, just be words. Do you know any art like this, or is the idea new to you?

Rudolf Tang, one of China’s leading music critics, [blogs about listening to music on international flights](#)

It’s clear that English isn’t Rudolf Tang’s first language, but I’m impressed and delighted — and also inspired — by how lively and personal he is when he writes in it. Clearly he’s a very busy man, who spends a lot of time on planes. And he has what for me is a unique point of view. I’ve never before seen anyone say that hearing music on a plane is the closest thing to hearing it in a concert hall, or that an airline’s entertainment system is the perfect place to find music you’ve never heard before. But as he explains them, these thoughts make perfect sense.

At one point, he mentions Yanni, an enormously successful New Age musician, whose work he dismisses as “easy listening.” If you haven’t heard Yanni, and you’re curious, [here’s a link](#) to a huge outdoor performance he did at the Acropolis, a legendary historical site in Greece.

Tang compares Yanni to Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Ensemble. I don’t think he thinks they’re similar musically, but he does link them, because (as you can read in his blog post) he thinks they both fit into the same two musical categories, world music and classical crossover. Classical crossover is a category for music that’s somewhat classical, but might also be somewhat like pop music, jazz, new age meditation music, or world music.

Tang gives a link to a [Silk Road video](#). You’re not required to watch it, but you might find it interesting.

In the video the ensemble is playing the melody of what you'll recognize as the slow movement from Dvořák's New World Symphony. But that melody was inspired in part by Negro spirituals, a term used for many years for the traditional songs of American Black people. One of Dvořák's students, William Arms Fisher, wrote words for the melody, creating a song called "Going Home," which can sound like a spiritual. Here's a [performance of it](#), by a legendary black American singer, Paul Robeson.

In the Silk Road's performance, it becomes an amazing cultural mix. It's sung in both in English and in Mandarin, by a singer-songwriter with a pop and folk music background. In the accompaniment are both a traditional Chinese and a traditional American instrument, a sheng and a banjo. I like the mix of cultures in all this, and you might, too.

From David Mitchell's novel *Utopia Avenue*: a young singer-songwriter [describes a Nina Simone concert](#)

Nina Simone, from her emergence in the 1950s to her death in 2003, was one of the world's great singers. She was trained as a classical pianist, and studied at Juilliard for one summer when she was young. She sang folk music, jazz, R&B, and pop, often playing the piano while she sang, sometimes introducing classical styles into her piano playing. She also was a passionate Black activist, and (as you can tell from this description of one of her performances) a formidable personality. Though she wasn't a happy person. She was bipolar, and grew unstable toward the end of her life.

David Mitchell is one of Britain's leading novelists (and my favorite of all the current novelists I've read). *Utopia Avenue* is his latest novel, published last year. It's about rock music in London during the 1960s. In this excerpt, a band just beginning its career is driving to a show in a battered old van its members call "the Beast." To pass the time, three of the musicians describe the best performances they've ever heard. This is one of those descriptions, coming from the only woman in the band, a singer, pianist, and songwriter named Elf Holloway.

When she says Nina Simone didn't stage any fake heart attacks, she's referring to a performance one of the other people in the band describes, by the great screaming R&B star Little Richard. He pretended to collapse on stage as if he were having a heart attack, and then got up to finish his performance by getting even more wild than he'd been before.

Little Richard was one of the biggest stars in 1950s rock & roll, and when he died last year, he was celebrated as a great American artist.

Optional videos, so if you like, you can see Nina Simone and Little Richard:

["Love Me or Leave Me"](#) Simone plays and sings jazz, and during a long improvised piano solo comes up with music that sounds a little like a Bach fugue.

["Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair"](#) An American folk song, which Simone sings in a way that's quietly sophisticated, but in my view still respects the simplicity of the original. She sings and plays the piano, partnered by Emil Latimer, a guitarist and singer.

["Long Tall Sally"](#) Little Richard sings one of his classic songs (which he also wrote), in a 1956 movie. He plays the piano while he sings and screams. Among much else, I love the part where a sax player in his band jumps up on the piano to play a solo. Not something we see classical wind players do!

Sidney Bechet, a great jazz musician, [describes bands he heard marching in parades](#), when he was a kid growing up in the Black community in New Orleans; from his 1960 autobiography, *Treat it Gentle*

Jazz comes from New Orleans. It emerged there, more than 100 years ago, when Black Americans combined the drums and rhythms of their African heritage with the Western

melody and harmony they learned when they were forcibly brought here and made to be slaves.

Sidney Bechet, who was born in 1897 and died in 1959, was one of the first great jazz soloists. He played clarinet, soprano sax, and trumpet. When he played in Europe in 1919, he became the first jazz musician publicly praised by an important classical figure, when the conductor Ernest Ansermet called him “an artist of genius.”

New Orleans, in Bechet’s childhood years, was a city drenched in Black music, as it still is today. In this excerpt from his autobiography, he shows us what it was like not just to hear bands marching in the street, but to march and dance with them. And how bands competed with each other. He says those competitions taught him what it means to truly have musical talent.

He writes in an individual way, and uses an old-fashioned slang word, which I don’t think we hear anymore — he calls musicians “musicianers.”

Optional listening:

I don’t think there are any recordings of the bands Bechet might have heard, even though records were being made then. Who in the highly commercial (and of course white-dominated) recording industry would have recorded Black street music from New Orleans? But [here’s a recording](#) made in 1951 by the Eureka Brass Band, which was formed in 1920, played in New Orleans street parades, and maybe gets us as close as we’re going to get to the bands Bechet heard.

If you’d like to hear Bechet himself, here’s a 1930s recording — an early jazz classic — of him and his band The New Orleans Feetwarmers. They’re [improvising a version](#) of the most famous ragtime piano piece, Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag.” What Bechet does at the end, high on his clarinet, shows why people sometimes say that jazz musicians wail.

September 22

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 the 1893 premiere of Sir Hubert Parry’s oratorio *Job*)

Notes on this review: Which you might want to read, because Shaw’s style of writing might not be familiar to you, and because you might not know all the many things he mentions.

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 that Parry — who was very famous back then — 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* literary rather than religious; it comes from the Jewish and Christian Bible). 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 most important. Is this oratorio anywhere near as good as the *Book of Job*? Shaw says it doesn’t come close, which makes it an “utter

failure.” Tommasini is much nicer to the composer he’s reviewing. Even though he thinks this piece doesn’t come close to the novel it’s based on, he says it’s good to see someone make a profession of writing operas. And also that it’s good that new operas are produced.

One thing to bear in mind — in our time, when Tommasini is writing, new classical music is somewhat specialized, off in a world of its own, with many critics trying to support it, wishing it were played more often.

But in 1893, when Shaw wrote this review, new pieces were heard all the time. Verdi, Brahms, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky were still alive! (Though Tchaikovsky died toward the end of that year.) In Britain, new oratorios like Parry’s were premiered every year, and widely performed.

So which approach do you like better? Is Shaw unfair to Parry? (Who, again, was famous in Shaw’s 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?

Then read this other review by Shaw:

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

Notes on this review

Shaw might have been famous for his sometimes outrageous opinions. But in this review I think he shows striking insight. He notes many striking details — things other critics might never mention — about Mottl’s performances. Do you agree?

September 29

Music criticism: Anne Midgette’s music reviews (published in the *Washington Post*, from 2012 to 2019)

Reading assignment:

["Lang Lang’s unique style, good and bad, offers originality"](#)

["Overly sweet ‘Faust’ at Washington National Opera proves more cloying than addictive"](#)

["Lakota music gets short shrift in concert meant to celebrate it"](#)

["Evgeny Kissin plays forgotten composers and declaims poetry in stunning performance"](#)

["As a classical music critic, I used to think the ‘Star Wars’ score was beneath me. I was wrong"](#)

About Anne’s reviews: I won’t say much about them here, because I think they speak for themselves, and because you’re likely to have heard some of the artists she writes about. I’ll only note that the area of music she knows best is opera, and I think the *Faust* review shows her expertise in operatic singing, opera staging, and the current state of the operatic field.

Optional reading: ["Assaults in dressing rooms. Groping during lessons. Classical musicians reveal a profession rife with harassment"](#)

This is Anne’s best-known piece, a powerful look at sexual harassment and abuse in classical music, written with her *Washington Post* colleague Peggy McGlone. This isn’t music criticism, but rather a piece of news reporting. Critics of an earlier generation didn’t do news reporting, but critics today are expected to do it. This report was widely read, and was strongly influential. Anne couldn’t mention all the people in the field whose misdeeds she reliably found out about, because not all the people they harassed or assaulted were willing to let their names be printed. And newspapers can’t allow powerful accusations to be made unless at least one

of the accusers is willing to speak openly. But Anne and Peggy did name three notable abusers, with powerful positions in classical music, and all either were fired from important positions, or else retired from their work.

October 6

Music criticism: Virgil Thomson's music reviews

Written assignment due next week, on Friday, October 15. Please write a review of music I'll put online. I'll put links to it on Canvas, and also email them to you.

Of course you'll send your work to me on Canvas. Remember that I don't accept late assignments, unless you've told me in advance that you'll be late, and we've agreed on a new deadline. So if you're going to be late with your work, you absolutely must let me know in advance, and arrange another due date.

If you like, you can read [my outline of how to write a music review](#). It might help you with your own review.

Here's the reading assignment for this class. Thomson — who was also an active composer — was chief music critic for the *New York Herald-Tribune* in the 1940s and 1950s. This is a newspaper that doesn't exist anymore, though that's not surprising. In those days there were many more daily newspapers in the U.S. than there are now, including no fewer than eight in New York.

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 you'd be more likely to believe, if you read them when they were published, and hadn't heard Heifetz?

And then read four more 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 in these four reviews. Seems to me that he approaches each pianist differently. For each one, he has one central thought about their playing, and he builds his review around that thought.

Many other critics, I think, would approach the four pianists in identical ways. They'd focus on describing how each pianist played each piece on their programs. At some point they might give some overview of how the pianist plays. But Thomson starts with that, and organizes his review around it.

Do you like that way of writing? Can you think of musicians whose playing you know, and describe what you think makes it distinctive?

Two notes about these reviews:

I don't know how much pianists today talk about Artur Schnabel. But in Thomson's time — and in my own early years in classical music, in the 1960s — he was all but worshipped as a Beethoven player, and his performances were thought to be exactly how Beethoven ought to be played. But Thomson writes that Schnabel's thoughts on Beethoven shouldn't “be taken as the voice of authority”! It's hard to understand now what a radical thing that was to say..

Thomson calls the British pianist Myra Hess “Dame Myra” because she’d received the female equivalent of a knighthood. In our time, Simon Rattle has been knighted, and became known as Sir Simon Rattle, or, more simply, Sir Simon. Similarly, Myra Hess became known as Dame Myra Hess, or Dame Myra.

Thomson says that at her concert she “thanked America” for its help with concerts she gave during wartime, and here’s why. Thomson wrote his review in 1946, just one year after the end of World War II. The U.S. and Britain were close allies in that war, and Hess became something of a war hero because she organized and performed in concerts given in London while the city was being bombed. Americans helped in this effort, in part by donating money. So Hess naturally would thank Americans, who already — because of her wartime efforts — felt very warm toward her.

October 13

Press releases:

Due Friday, October 15— your writing assignment, your review of music I’ve put online

Reading assignment:

["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 have normally been written. You might say that it’s detailed and informative, telling you all you’d want to know about what Hampson was doing in 2012. Or you might think — as I’m afraid I do — that it’s pretty much 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?

Two posts from my blog:

["Bad Press Releases"](#)

["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 second of these blog posts, about how I think releases might be written?

More press releases (you can decide for yourself which ones you like):

["Soprano Julia Bullock Makes Her Premiere as The Met’s Artist in Residence"](#)

Note that “The Met” here means the Metropolitan Museum of Art, not the Met Opera. In New York, outside the classical music world, people saying “the Met” almost always mean the museum.

["In Series and the Pleiades Project Collaborate in Virtual Opera House Premiere"](#)

["Seong-Jin Cho’s Latest Solo Album, The Wanderer, To Be Released On 3 April 2020"](#)

["To Shiver the Sky, Black Love Experience, \\$25K Matching Gift, More"](#) (Washington Performing Arts email newsletter, September 2020)

This isn't a press release. It's much more informal. But it's a similar kind of communication, designed to tell people what an organization is doing. I wanted you to read it because I think it's wonderfully done, lively, clear, and inviting.

October 20

Program notes

Assignment due next week, at our next class, on October 27: Prepare a short, informal presentation — just five minutes long — about a piece you love, maybe something you yourself play or sing (though you can choose something you don't perform, if you want to). If you're a composer, you can talk about a piece you've written.

You'll give this presentation in class. And, very important: I'd like you to speak as if you're talking to people who don't normally listen to classical music.

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.

And I'd like you not to talk about the history of the piece or its structure, as we so often do. Instead, I'd like you to do something much more personal — to talk from your heart about why you love the piece. Remember, again, that you're imagining yourself talking to people who don't know classical music. Will the history and structure of the piece mean much to them?

Of course, if there's something about the history or structure of the piece that truly excites you, feel free to talk about it! Just find a way to do it so that people outside our field can understand.

But otherwise, I'm not interested in scholarly analysis. Just speak from your heart about why you love this piece.

Reading assignment:

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

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

Anderson & Roe (a terrific piano duo): [program notes](#) for a concert I heard them give at the National Gallery in Washington

Greg Anderson and Elizabeth Roe both took my spring semester course, and I've been friendly with them ever since. Their look, their repertoire, their playing — and their videos! — are well worth [checking out](#). (I take no credit for any of it. They say I encouraged them, and I'm glad I did. But they were doing most of what they do before they knew me, and before the great success they're having now.)

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 *Missa Solemnis* 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 haven't 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 like Franz's approach. What do you think of it?

October 27

Your presentations

Presentations due. You'll all give yours in class, and we'll all discuss them. There won't be time for all of them today, so we'll continue during the next few weeks, doing a few of them in each class.

November 3

Your elevator pitch

No assignment. This week we'll talk about how you should present yourself to the world. What you should tell the world about yourself, to get people interested in what you do. Those people could include your audience, people you'd like to be in your audience, managers, people who might book you for performances, or, if you're a composer, people who might commission a piece from you.

There are two ways you can do this. One is to say, in an objective way, what you do. Just the facts. But put in a brief, compelling way, in as few words as possible.

The other way is, in effect, to advertise yourself. To tell people what's interesting or even distinctive about the way you make music. Why should people come to hear you perform?

We'll experiment with finding answers, which will be different for everyone. And we'll find ways to make our answers short and compelling. This is what's called your "elevator pitch." Because, as I wrote in the course overview, it's what you might say to someone about yourself, if you stood next to them in an elevator — maybe here at Juilliard! — and had to describe yourself before the elevator ride ended. Maybe you'd have 30 seconds. What would you say in that short time to get someone interested?

That situation really can arise, maybe not always in elevators, but often at parties or receptions, when you find yourself talking to someone you've wanted to meet. Or you might be introducing yourself in an email, which you'd want to keep keep short, because people are more likely to read short emails than long ones.

In many situations, you need to make an impression quickly. Developing an elevator pitch will help you do that. And can help you define the most important things about what you do. Which then can help you focus longer descriptions of yourself, in your artist bio, on your website, and in press releases and social media posts about your performances.

November 10

Artist bios

Reading assignment (bios on the musicians' websites):

[Yefim Bronfman](#)

[Pretty Yende](#) (a young soprano, a rising opera star)

[Lawrence Brownlee](#) (one of the world's leading operatic tenors)

[Shanghai Quartet](#)

[Misha Penton](#) (soprano, experimental vocal composer, new music and new opera vocal artist, director, writer, and media/visual artist)

[Megan McDuffee](#) (a film composer)

[Jeffrey Nych](#) (composer, director of the Entrepreneurship Center for Music at the University of Colorado, Boulder)

Some of these bios are what I'd call orthodox ones, written in what for many years has been a standard way. They're long lists of achievements, with little or anything about what makes the artist distinctive — what their music-making is like, for instance, or what they're like as people, or what goals they have in their careers. Bronfman's is a good example of that. (Which I don't mean as any reflection on him as a pianist.)

You'll see that Pretty Yende's and Lawrence Brownlee's bios are different in two ways. First, they have striking photos, and they highlight ecstatic quotes from reviews. Second, Yende has a personal history and Brownlee a personal and artistic commitment that make them different from most other artists.

I'm no fan of the standard approach, which I think makes bios — to put it mildly — uninteresting to read. And uninformative. Why, for instance, do we need a such a very long list of conductors Bronfman works with? We know he's one of the world's top pianists. So of course he works with all the leading conductors.

I also think that Yende and Brownlee's bios — despite the lively graphics and quotes — are boring to read. And don't stress enough the story and the commitment that makes these artists distinctive.

So I've included some bios that do things differently, bios that focus — sometimes in very personal language — on who the artist really is. Do you like these bios? Could you imagine writing one like them for yourself? You're not required to say yes!

November 17

Subject of this class to be announced. I'll decide later in the semester what we'll talk about.

And you'll have a voice in this! After we've gotten to know each other, I'll have a better idea of what you might want or need to learn. And if there's something you'd like to do in this class, you can tell me.

November 24 — Thanksgiving break, no class

December 1

Pop music criticism

Written assignment due in two weeks, on Wednesday, December 15, the date of our last class. Please write your own bio, and write program notes for a piece you perform.

When you write your bio, you can use what we talked about in the last class and what we'll talk about in this one. What are the most important — and most convincing — things you can say about yourself? How do you put these into a bio that also gives people details about what you do, and what your career has been up to now?

Again, you'll send this to me on Canvas. And, again, remember that if you're going to be late, you absolutely must let me know in advance, and arrange another due date.

There's no reading assignment for this week. In class we'll listen 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 8

More on pop music criticism

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 1970 book in which rock critics pick the album they'd take if they were stranded somewhere, and could pick only one record to take with them):

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 this song got him to bond, if only for a moment, with kids whose culture is very far from his own?

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 discuss, and says he doesn't care to describe the whole thing. Would a classical critic ever do that?

December 15

Final discussion, no assignment

Bio and program notes due.