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SOUND AND SENSE: WRITING ABOUT MUSIC

It's hard to write well about music. The problem involves translating the sounds of a non-referential language with its own strictly musical meanings into a language that explains musical meanings logically and verbally. But the sound of music is not readily translatable into the sound of sense. Good music writing, nonetheless, somehow succeeds in making sense; it makes sense in what it says directly about the music, and in what it suggests indirectly, in what circumscribes the music as well.

One of the more successful and exciting ways of writing about music is to imitate the sounds, textures, and forms of music, to create, partly through the vocabulary of music, partly through controlling the sounds and rhythms of language, poems that make music. Among the more deservedly famous examples are John Dryden's "Alexander's Feast" and "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day," Wallace Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier," D.H. Lawrence's "Piano," and Langston Hughes' jazz poems. Such poems make musical sense as well as logical sense. Their language expresses, through particularly successful mimetic stratagems, the sound, style, tone, or mood of the music that the poems both describe and create.

But one doesn't have to write poetry to write well about music. George Bernard Shaw, Aaron Copland, Whitney Balliett, Bernard Haggin, and Leonard Bernstein are some who have served music well in prose characterized by clarity, sense, grace, wit, and passion. These and other music writers do not always write directly about musical sounds; sometimes they write around the music, skirting the sounds to discuss matters peripheral and ancillary to music itself, coming directly at the musical sounds only momentarily in brief stints of description and analysis. And it is in such direct attempts to characterize or capture the music in words that most music writers fail—by turning either to highly technical

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language or to a series of subjective responses. Only a few, in fact, have written well about music in prose; more often than not they are either professional musicians who know how to write, like Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, and Virgil Thompson, or professional writers who know how to listen, such as George Bernard Shaw, Bernard Haggin, and Whitney Balliett.

In spite of the difficulty of writing well about music, or perhaps because of it, a course in "Writing About Music" can be especially useful, even attractive, for college students. Pragmatic as they are, students may see such a course as one way of relating a writing requirement both to immediate academic circumstances and to their later lives. Or they may see it simply as an opportunity to discuss what interests them.

Such a course has advantages for instuctors as well. It allows teachers who love music to indulge, in the classroom, one of their stronger avocational passions. Moreover, it brings together students and teachers with a shared interest, often with an ardent enthusiasm for music, bonding them in special and mysterious ways. Finally, the sharp focus of subject lends an advanced composition course a coherence it might normally lack.

But there is one major difficulty: the students taking a music writing course often have widely varying musical backgrounds, and, in addition, different degrees of both musical knowledge and writing proficiency. To illustrate how a musically various student population can be accommodated and to explain how one such course for writers with different degrees of skill might be structured is my purpose in describing my course "Writing About Music" at Queens College (CUNY).

I have taught English 6.8, "Writing About Music," for three semesters, to about fifty students. Although most of the students are sophomores, the rest range from freshmen to seniors. And although most take the course to satisfy a second-semester writing requirement, some take it as an elective, simply for fun. Surprisingly few are music majors. Of the non-music-major majority, few know much about classical music or express even the slightest interest in it. Some express contempt for it. Coupled with this limitation of musical knowledge is a parochialism that affects classical enthusiasts as well as jazz fans, rock lovers as well as disco habitués. Moreover, the prejudices can be as strong within a particular musical camp as they are between camps. Students who advocate a specific kind of popular music such as new wave or punk rock, for example, are often insistent about and impatient with what they consider the inanity, tawdriness, or banality of other kinds of popular music not much different from what they currently accept as musical gospel.

This musical demography cannot be ignored. A writing teacher in my circumstances—and I think in most circumstances, except perhaps in a

conservatory of music—will rarely confront a homogeneous group of music lovers. And even if he or she does, teacher and students might very well hold to different musical ideals. These differences of musical opinion, affinity, and experience can create tension, hostility and fear, resulting in a fractured class. But they don't have to. In fact, the variousness of the students' musical interests and experience may be, perhaps ought to be, exploited by the instructor. Disagreements that arise in class discussion, for example, can be made occasions for encouraging students to argue their positions more fully and finely in their written work. Beyond this, students can, in small ways, instruct one another in their areas of expertise—by *ad hoc* explanations of terms, by impromptu musical demonstrations. I once had a student demonstrate a "riff" by playing one on his trombone; on another occasion a student illustrated the differences between chest singing and head singing with a bit of extemporaneous vocalizing.

But such attempts at flexibility, important as they may be, derive less from the nature of a course in writing about music than from the patience and tact of the instructor. Other very different kinds of accommodations, however, can be built into the course requirements, especially into the materials and assignments.

First, the materials. The primary material for the course is the students' own writing, produced both in small bursts in the classroom through finger exercises—loose ones like speculating on a question or reacting to a song and stricter ones like imitating sentence patterns or working with metaphor and analogy—and in longer essays at home. Students read their essays aloud to the class as audience, and they confer with me between drafts. In addition to their own productions, the class reads essays and articles by professionals: Ralph Ellison and Whitney Balliett on jazz; Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Bernard Haggin, and George Bernard Shaw on the classics; current periodicals such as *Stereo Review* on popular music. Beyond these readings, I encourage students to write for the campus newspapers, to write reviews, feature articles, and persuasive essays, and to do interviews as well. Occasionally, I have asked students to bring in a record or tape, which then serves as a catalyst for writing.

In the writing assignments, I try for diversity in approach, mode, and problem, allowing students to choose their own subjects and to write all their essays about whatever music they know best—an option most of them take. I have had students who have written every paper on jazz or on rock. One student wrote consistently on punk rock. Another wrote eight essays on classical music—all about the piano.

Since I am not training music critics, and since the range of student ability varies widely, I do not require that they always write directly about the music, either analytically or descriptively. They can write around the

music as well—at least some of the time. My essay assignments reflect this mix of writing about music and around it, and, for a semester's work, typically include an autobiographical essay about a musical experience; a speculative essay; an analysis; an essay on an instrument: playing the flute, the decline of the harmonica, the guitar as a concert instrument; an essay on a performer or composer, looking especially at style or musical ancestry; two reviews, one of a record, the other of a concert; and, finally, a research essay, usually with a historical slant.

I have twice begun the course with the autobiographical essay. Most students write either a loosely structured reminiscence, or, singling out an especially important musical moment in their lives, write a chronological narrative. Some combine the two. My springboard into the assignment combines class discussion of musical recollections with analysis of a superb essay by Ralph Ellison, "Living With Music,"[1] an essay which describes, among other things, his struggle in learning to play the trumpet, his love of vocal singing, his respect and love for musicians of discipline and integrity, his personal reconciliation of jazz and classical music, and very conveniently for me, his struggle to write. This piece is honest, compassionate, humorous, engaging—and beautifully, even hauntingly written. I return to it later in the term for exercises in diction and style.

An alternative to beginning with a personal experience essay is to begin with the music writing most familiar to students: the record review. I have done this also, following the review with the autobiographical assignment. In either case, I use the record review as an early assignment and the concert review near the end of the term both for practical reasons—the students need time to attend a concert—and for aesthetic ones, so that the course comes full circle.

The speculative essay is a rather loose assignment that simply invites the student to explore a musical question, issue, or problem. It might be as broad as "Why do people listen to music?" or "Why do people attend concerts?" It might be more focused: "Why is disco currently fashionable?"; "What is the future of punk rock?"; "Why are most disco stars women and most rock stars men?" The questions might be answered in a sentence or two, but I ask the students to expand that simple answer, particularly by considering numerous possibilities as satisfactory answers, at least provisionally. I try, in this early assignment, to encourage imaginative thinking, to put the emphasis not on being right or on proving a point persuasively, but on invention and discovery of ideas through considering

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[1]Ralph Ellison, "Living With Music," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, Vintage paper edition, 1972), pp. 187-198.

alternate, even opposite explanations, through asking questions of questions of questions, and through making connections among disparate facts.

The essay on an instrument can be used as a transitional piece, moving from the looser forms of autobiography, review, and speculation to the stricter forms of definition, description, and analysis. Students can be asked to write two essays on an instrument, perhaps for different audiences, perhaps in different styles, tones, or moods. They can, for example, describe what it's like to play different instruments, or they can celebrate one above all others; they can compare, classify, define one or more types of a particular instrument, or look into its history.

Perhaps the assignment which most requires accommodations is the analysis essay, since some students simply don't have enough musical knowledge to write a good technical analysis. And yet some kind of practice in analysis, however abbreviated or attenuated, can certainly enhance the students' musical understanding. Less musically prepared students can select a popular song, or one of their long-time favorites, and take it apart section by section, describing what they hear. They can be encouraged to watch the way the song develops, to see what it repeats and why; they can be invited to explain the connections between the appropriateness of music and lyrics. Class discussion can center generally on specific problems in analysis and can demonstrate with simple pieces how one goes about analyzing a piece of music. In fact, analytic procedures might even be illustrated with non-musical materials, with advertisements for example, at least as an adjunct to the musical analysis demonstrated. For the more musically knowledgeable, the analysis assignment provides an opportunity to do a serious and thorough interpretation of a short piece of music. The essays of these musically experienced students ought to be more detailed, more technical, and more rigorous than most of their earlier, less musically analytical writing.

One other assignment that bulks large in the students' consciousness is the research essay—simply because it requires them to go outside of themselves for ideas. At Queens, it requires also that they familiarize themselves with a separate and well-stocked music library. I try to keep this assignment from dominating either the course or the students by limiting it to five typed pages and by requiring only four sources. Ideally, the research essay grows out of and elaborates on an earlier essay, but it might just as easily be an entirely new piece. I suggest that it have a historical slant and that the student trace the development of a performer's or composer's career. I encourage the students to search out and explore origins, influences, developments, and continuities. And I urge, finally, that the research topic be a question to which the paper is an answer.

The assignments, taken together, give a reasonably broad experience of writing about music. They require the use of different modes of discourse, asking the student to narrate, describe, explain, speculate, and persuade. They are designed to encourage students to mix modes and to combine the basic patterns of exposition the way skilled writers normally do. And, of course, through exercises in writing, thinking, and knowing, these assignments are my way of introducing a wide range of rhetorical concerns: invention, arrangement, and style; pre-writing, writing, and re-writing; audience, purpose, structure, and tone.

Of the traditional concerns of rhetoric, style receives the most attention in my course. Aspects of syntax and diction are regularly recurring centers of interest both in the professional writing we analyze and in the writing the students themselves produce, both in class and at home. The students work primarily at imitating and experimenting with varied sentence forms and patterns, and with simile, metaphor, and analogy as well.

These two concerns—the first, learning to expand and vary the sentence in form, length, and emphasis and to mix sentences effectively, the second, learning to describe and explain through analogy and metaphor—are essential if students are to write effectively about music. Both sentence control and analogical writing are especially important for describing what it's like to hear a particular piece of music and for giving a sense of the music itself. This attempt to capture in language the sounds of music is the most difficult aspect of writing about music; it is also what distinguishes writing about music from writing about other subjects. This is not to suggest that writing about science, to choose but one example, doesn't require the use of imaginative analogy and metaphor or the assistance of resilient and flexible sentences. But writing about music requires, even more fully than writing about other disciplines, controlled and imaginative use of syntax and metaphor.

Both of these emphases, moreover, but especially the work with metaphor, serve to help the music writer keep a reasonable balance between his subjective experience and the objective world. Because music is such a strongly connotative medium, a medium which creates intense and widely varying effects in its listeners, and because it stimulates emotion in complex and mysterious ways, it is both a powerfully expressive and an unstable medium. For the music writer, an awareness of the subjectivity of his own responses is a necessary precondition for writing with even a modicum of objectivity and communicability for a non-specialist audience.

To illustrate how close music critics have come in making sense of musical sound, I presented representative selections from a few writers. Although they are writing for different audiences in a wide range of styles, each of these writers reveals an awareness of the subjective nature of the

music writing enterprise, both controlling and exploiting that subjectivity by a sureness of syntax and a penchant for creative analogy. First, Leonard Bernstein writing for children:

> Let's just see how Tchaikovsky went about building up that lovely theme of his by simply repeating his ideas in a certain arranged order—what I like to call the 1-2-3 method. In fact so many famous themes are formed by exactly this method that I think you ought to know about it. Here's how it works: first of all there is a short idea, or phrase: (musical quote)—second, the same phrase is repeated, but with a small variation: (musical quote)—and third, the tune takes off in a flight of inspiration: (musical quote). 1, 2, and 3—like a 3-stage rocket, or like the countdown in a race: "On your mark, get set, go!" Or in target practice: "Ready, aim, fire!" Or in a movie studio: "Lights, camera, action!" It's always the same 1, 2, and 3![2]

And Bernstein again, this time writing for adults:

> So we're in the midst of a chromatic adventure. How do we get out of this strange A-flat territory? (musical quote). By a simple chromatic shift, like side-slipping on skis (quote)—and there we are back safely in B-flat major, where we belong.
>
> Now, if you could follow that, you can follow any number of similar adventures—for instance, the way Mozart starts his development. He has established us firmly in B-flat major (quote); but, no (quote), off he goes on another chromatic adventure (quote) which lands us in the impossible key of F-sharp minor! Now, this was done by absolute whim—arbitrarily. It's a bit of chromatic acrobatics, if you will, startling us into a development section, which is just what a development should be—startling new looks at old material. But, eventually, he must get us back to a recapitulation in G minor, the original home soil.[3]

I like to ask my students to compare the passages for tone, content, and style. Both passages are highly conversational, informal, and colloquial; both rely heavily on comparison, the first passage on analogy, the second on metaphor; both are unabashedly didactic. Equally noteworthy are the differences: the more complex idea of the second passage, its use of metaphor rather than analogy, its inclusion of technical musical

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[2]Leonard Bernstein, *Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, rev., 1970), pp. 16-18.

[3]Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.43.

terminology. Both are typical of Bernstein in his role as teacher—a successful teacher largely because of his skill with seeing one thing in terms of another.

But not all successful writers about music use metaphor in just the way Bernstein does. I include for analysis a few examples from writers whose metaphoric tone and touch are both different from Bernstein's and different from one another's. Here, in straightforward and clear simple prose is Aaron Copland describing timbre:

> After rhythm, melody, and harmony, comes timbre, or tone color. Just as it is impossible to hear speech without hearing some specific timbre, so music can exist only in terms of some specific color in tone. Timbre in music is analogous to color in painting...Just as most mortals know the difference between white and green, so the recognition of differences in tone color is an innate sense with which most of us are born. It is difficult to imagine a person so "tone-blind" that he cannot tell a bass voice from a soprano, or, to put it instrumentally, a tuba from a cello.[4]

And here, in more elaborate prose, spiced lightly with humor, is George Bernard Shaw performing a similar didactic function:

> The music of the eighteenth century is all dance music. A dance is a symmetrical pattern of steps that are pleasant to move to; and its music is a symmetrical pattern of sound that is pleasant to listen to even when you are not dancing to it. Consequently the sound patterns, though they begin by being as simple as chessboards, get lengthened and elaborated and enriched with harmonies until they are more like Persian carpets; and the composers who design these patterns no longer expect people to dance to them. Only a whirling Dervish could dance a Mozart symphony: indeed, I have reduced two young and practiced dancers to exhaustion by making them dance a Mozart overture.[5]

Finally, Whitney Balliett, the jazz critic, in language which tries to capture the sound and feeling of the experience, describes a performance:

> Taylor, as is his wont, played just one number, but it lasted forty minutes. It was full of his usual devices—the slamming chords, the agitated staccato passages, the breathtaking arpeggios, the blizzard density—but it had two new qualities: lyricism and gentleness. Again and again, after Taylor had

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[4]Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1939, rev., 1957, New American Library, Mentor paper edition, 1957), p. 56.

[5]George Bernard Shaw, *The Great Composers: Reviews and Bombardments*, ed., Louis Crompton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 19.

launched one of his tidal waves, his hands going up and down like driving rods, he slipped into clear lagoons where shadows of melody glided just below the surface.[6]

Whatever students may think of such imaginative flights of language in this extravagant, almost Baroque prose, such writing is useful pedagogically for its command of metaphor and for its daring; it risks going too far for the sake of trying to give the reader what the listener saw and heard. And Balliett's control of syntax, worthy of in-class imitation exercises, is an additional attraction.

III

Implicit in my discussion of writing about music are a number of connections between writing and music, between making music and listening to it, and further, between and among writing, listening, and reading. First, good music, like good writing, begins and ends in feeling for music makers as well as for writers, for listeners as well as for readers. And the driving impulse in both forms of composing, from the initial emotional stirring to the final complex web of feeling, is the impulse of expression. But if writers and musicians—and here again I mean both performers and composers—are to be successful, it cannot end there. Rather, this initial emotional impulse must be followed, caught, controlled, and shaped so that the organized sounds, whether verbal or musical, make sense. Only then does the composer's music or writing become communicable. Only then can it move from feeling to form and back again through form to a new and enriched kind of feeling.

But neither writing nor music is all feeling and form. Music and writing are also play: performers play instruments and they play music, composers play with themes and motives, writers play with words, sentences, and forms. And, in both the game of notes and the game of words, play is important as a tactic of invention: it eliminates blockages; it reduces frustration; it assists serendipitous discoveries. We play with notes and with words to find forms, to discover ideas, to communicate with others and, ultimately, with ourselves.

Play with music and with language, however, is not limited to music and language makers; it is shared by listeners and readers as well. By the very acts of listening and reading, those less obvious but no less active performers enter the game. Listeners and readers play with what they hear,

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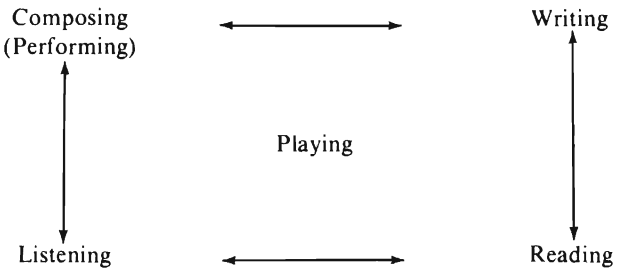
[6]Whitney Balliett, *New York Notes: A Journal of Jazz in the Seventies*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977), p. 26.

interpreting it, sizing it up, relating, elaborating, and putting together the things they hear in new ways, forming from them new wholes. These four activities, writing, reading, listening, and composing, are reciprocal and overlapping acts which reinforce and stimulate one another. They might be diagrammed like this:



The horizontal pairs designate parallel activities, the vertical pairs reciprocal ones.

But, however we choose to think about the connections between the languages of writing and music, however we choose to decode and describe these activities, one thing is certain: language and music, however different their basic data of sound, however unique their raw material, together derive from and ultimately rest upon the reciprocal impulses of expression and communication. Harnessing powerful feelings, they create forms of sound and sense capable of being heard, felt, and understood. And finally, the thing that makes writing about music exacting yet exciting is the challenge of translating those fleeting, evanescent sounds with their intangible textures, colors, and shades of feeling into words, into language that captures these sounds and communicates as far as possible what it is like to hear them.