

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

Spring 2025 revised 3/24

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[email me](#)

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

Class schedule and assignments

You'll find links here to all reading assignments, and also to optional listening and videos.

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, let's say, February 5 should be done before our February 5 class. 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 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.

January 21

No class — I have a recording session for my three string quartets. We'll either fold the content for this week into next week's class, or (if we can) meet online.

January 28

Introduction to this course (class discussion)

I'll tell you about myself, and tell you about the course. And, most important, I'll ask you all to tell me why the course interests you. Among much else, that helps me plan what to teach. I've often changed assignments or invented new ones, because of things you've wanted to discuss.

February 5

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 and avant-garde classical music:

[“Cage Speaks Louder When the Street Gets Noisy”](#)

February 12

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. I linked them, along with the comments on who these musicians were, in case you might be 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 around the time the novel was written. There are some interesting things here, about what classical music was like back then. First, the 1910 audience thinks it’s natural to applaud between movements. And it also seems natural for younger people to be at a classical concert, including a teenager who follows a score. As you’ll see if you take my spring semester course, the classical music audience was much younger in past generations than it is now.

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 she gives us a more subjective account of the music — a more personal one — than we normally encounter these days. It’s about threatening goblins she hears in the third movement, and how Beethoven vanquishes them, only to see them return in the finale.

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 classical 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 affects how they think about music.

But what do you think? Do you like the way Tom writes? Do you like his personal approach? Or, for that matter, mine? 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, like the piece Tom talks about in his review. Do you know about art like this, or is the idea new to you?

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 her) 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, especially famous for *Cloud Atlas*, which was made into a movie. *Utopia Avenue* is his most recent book, published in 2020. 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 two years ago, 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, more than 100 years ago; from his 1960 autobiography, *Treat it Gentle*

Jazz comes from New Orleans. It emerged there, early in the last century, 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, 100 or more years ago — and 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.”

February 19 audition week, no class

February 26

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

Reading assignment:

Compare two reviews, one by Shaw and the other by Anthony Tommasini, former 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, like me, you most likely won't know all the people from his time that he mentions.

Tommasini, "[A Tale of Sex and Disdain in Wharton's Berkshires](#)" (about a new opera that premiered in 1999)

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 to see new operas produced.

One thing to bear in mind — in our time, when Tommasini is writing, new classical music has been 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. In Britain, new oratorios like Parry's were premiered every year, and widely performed.

So which approach do you like better? Which matters more, a composer's professional skill, or their artistic impact?

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 (which again you might want to read)

Shaw might have been famous for his sometimes outrageous opinions. But in this review I think he shows striking insight. He notes many musical details — things other critics might

never mention — about Mottl's performances. Do you think he understands orchestral playing?

March 5

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

Written assignment due on Wednesday, March 26 . 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.

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"](#)

["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 former *Washington Post* colleague Peggy McGlone, who then was a news reporter who covered the arts.

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 the important positions they held, or else retired from their work.

March 12

Music criticism: Virgil Thomson's classical music reviews (published in the *New York Herald-Tribune*, a newspaper that no longer exists, in the 1940s and 1950s)

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 was 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, though he's also very detailed, and sarcastic. 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 is now called 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. Press releases:

March 26

Classical music publicity

Written assignment due today, March 26. Your review of music I 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 what then was one of the leading classical music publicity companies, one that worked 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 going to be doing. 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?

A post from the blog I used to write about the future of classical music:

["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?

[Excerpts from classical music publicity:](#)

See what you think of these. Some are better than others. Some, I think, are really bad. Full of empty praise for what's being described, and sometimes with factual mistakes. As you read them, ask yourself this question: Would they make you want to hear the performances they describe? Would they make you interested in classical music?

And if you find them unconvincing (as I do), how would you make them better?

Two good press releases:

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

["Robert Levin: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart The Piano Sonatas"](#)

April 2

Program notes

Assignment due next week, at our next class, on April 9: Prepare a short, informal presentation — just five minutes long — about a piece you love, maybe something you yourself play or sing, or something you've written, if you're a composer. Though you can choose something you're not involved with, if you want to.

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 music 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.

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 anything they do. 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?

April 9

Artist bios

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

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)

Ryan McKinny (a bass-baritone who sings leading roles at major opera houses, and developed a new career as a filmmaker during the pandemic)

On his website, he has two pages that function as bios.

First, his [home page](#).

And then his [official bio page](#).

The two pages present him very differently.

[Alison Peters Fujito](#) (Pittsburgh Symphony violinist)

[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.) Ryan McKinny's official bio is pretty much like that.

You'll see that Pretty Yende's and Lawrence Brownlee's bios are different from Bronfman's in two ways. First, they *look* more lively. 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.

But I 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 other bios that do things very differently, bios that focus — sometimes in very personal language — on who the artist really is. These include Ryan McKinny's home page, which I think introduces him far better than his official bio does.

And I especially respect Alison Fujito's bio. You could call her an orthodox classical musician, playing in the first violin section of the Pittsburgh Symphony. But her bio is anything but orthodox. It's full of personality, and is fun to read.

Maybe some of the other bios here are even livelier, but they come from people outside the classical music mainstream, or even outside classical music entirely. Fujito, in her position, can't take chances that others do, can't stand out too much from her colleagues. And yet she has a bio that's completely her own. Which is why I respect her so much.

Do you like these bios? Could you imagine writing one like them for yourself? You're not required to say yes. And you also might not be allowed to use a bio like these, if, say, you were performing on a concert series, and the people running the series wanted something more conventional.

Still, it's worth thinking about. I had a consulting client once, who wrote a highly personal bio, and quickly got a music director's job, at an orchestra that wanted all of him, not just what he could do as a conductor, but who he was as a person.

So you might ask yourself: If you wrote a very personal bio, what would it say?

April 16

Explaining classical music to the world

Reading assignment TBA

Assignment to be done in class

Classical music needs to expand its audience, needs to find new people to care about what we do, to go to concerts.

Those people, obviously, aren't listening to classical music now. So we have to find ways to talk to them. How can we get them interested?

There are many ways to do that. Some of them involve things you can say about what you do as a classical musician. That's what I want to focus on in this assignment.

I'd like you to do two things.

First, tell us all something you deeply love about being a classical musician. Something that might interest other people, make them respect what you do, make them think they could be interested themselves.

This can be anything you want. Anything that you truly love, deeply love, even crazily love, about what you do.

Second, tell us two things nobody would know about what you do as a classical musician. Things nobody would guess. Things that open the doors to what your life in classical music is like, and let people see it as if they were there themselves.

What's an example of that?

Here's something I heard once at a conference. This was a presentation by one of the two people who then taught music at West Point, the United States Military Academy, where people who want careers in the U.S. Army go to college.

I didn't know they taught music there, but apparently they do. This teacher was an oboist. She said she played the oboe for a class, and then smashed the reed. "Now," she said, "I can't play my instrument. I have to make another reed."

And, she said, the students in the class gathered around, fascinated, to watch her do this.

So that's one thing people outside classical music might not know about the oboe. What wouldn't they know about what your instrument, or your singing, or your composing? Or anything else you're involved with.

I could tell people something about my life as a composer. I spend endless hours preparing and printing my music. I have to make the scores and parts absolutely clear, and easy to read.

Of course I use software for that, but it takes forever. Musical notation uses so many symbols! Notes, rests, barlines, dynamic marks, slurs, crescendos, and articulation markings, to name some of them. And then there are verbal directions a composer puts in their scores.

All of these have to be positioned so they're easy to read, don't get in each other's way. And have to be positioned so it's obvious what note or passage in the music they refer to.

Believe me, that takes a long time. Anyone who hasn't done it might not guess how long it takes.

So what things do you do, that someone else — especially someone outside classical music — wouldn't know about?

If you think for a minute, I'd guess you'd find a lot of things. Just name one or two.

And you can have fun with this. You can describe something really out there, something nobody would guess has anything to do with music.

I think of horn players, shaking water out of their instruments. A tuba player putting in a mute, which is gigantic. Orchestral viola players, possibly deafened by the trombones positioned right next to them. Bass players, traveling with their bass, maybe needing a van, buying an extra plane ticket, or whatever's required.

Whatever you choose, try to bring it really alive for anyone who hears it.

With any luck, you'll come out of this class with some idea of how to tell people around you what you do, and why you love it so much.

April 23

Pop music criticism

Written assignment due in two weeks, on Wednesday, May 7, the date of our last class. Please write your own bio, and write program notes for a piece you perform. Or, if you're a composer, for a piece you've written. Please don't use the piece you talked about in your presentation! Choose something else.

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?

If you'd like to write an imaginative bio, of the kind we've discussed, go for it! But if you don't feel comfortable doing that, I can understand how you feel, and you should write a bio you're comfortable with.

But let me give you a challenge. Even if you write a bio in conventional style, can you put at least a couple of personal things in it? Can you find a way to tell us things you love about music, and about being a musician? Or about difficulties you've faced, and overcome?

And can you make the bio interesting to read?

The same thoughts apply to your program note. Think of the presentation you gave, in which you told us why you love the piece of music you chose? In a program note, you'd want to give more background information about the piece, because some people reading the program note will want to know that. But even so, can you make the program note personal, and make us feel why you love the music you're talking about?

Again, you'll send this assignment 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.

April 30

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* (!this is a 1970 book in which rock critics picked the album they'd take if they were stranded somewhere, and could take only one record with them; of course this was before we streamed music!):

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 much 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. At the beginning, he says that he was badly depressed when *Astral Weeks* came out, and that the album was like a light in the darkness. Or, as he puts it, "like a light on the far shores of the murk."

And at the end, he talks about living in New York in 1970, about how (and this is really true) you'd sometimes see homeless people just lying in the streets. Van Morrison, he thinks, sings with great compassion about people. Which makes Bangs ask himself how he should feel, what he should do, when he sees someone lying in the street, and doesn't even know if they're dead or alive.

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?

May 7

Final discussion, no assignment

Bio and program notes due.