SPEAKING OF MUSIC:

HOW TO TALK AND WRITE ABOUT IT

revised 11/12

Fall 2019

Greg Sandow

phone/text: 917 797-4265

email me

go to my website

read my blog on the future of classical music

find me on Twitter

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read the course overview

find New York Times music reviews

(This link takes you to all the current music stories in the Times, *including pop reviews, feature stories, classical reviews, whatever. Browse to find classical reviews.)*

find my wife's reviews in the *Washington Post*

(My wife Anne Midgette has been chief classical music critic for the Washington Post, *though she's leaving that job on November 22. This link takes you to everything she writes, including feature articles, news reports, and blog posts. Browse to find her concert reviews.)*

Classwork and assignments

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

All reading and listening assignments should be done by the date they're listed under, so we can discuss them in that day's class. Which means that assignments listed for September 12 should be done by September 12. 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.

September 4

Introduction to this course (class discussion)

September 11

My own writing

Reading assignment:

Some of my music reviews, from the days when I was music critic, writing first about classical music, then about pop, and then about classical music again. Because 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"

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 the late Aretha Franklin)

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

"Cage Speaks Louder When the Street Gets Noisy"

September 18

Ways to write about music

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. Some interesting things here, though not strictly relevant to this course, are (1) that the audience applauds between movements of the symphony, and (2) that it doesn't seem unusual for there to be younger people 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' 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 piece is about the sound of snow, which many people would say wasn't music at all. But Tom (who was strongly influenced by John Cage) thought it was just as much music as anything else.

Tom also says "I" a lot. He becomes a leading character in the stories he tells. Some people think this is wrong. Critics, these people think, should be strictly objective, and should focus on the music, not on themselves. Others might say that any critic's opinion is of course a personal one, and that therefore it makes sense to know what kind of person the critic is. Because who they are as a person of course affects their musical judgment.

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, a beloved member of the Beatles, and has 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?)

Jack Kerouac describes a jazz performance (an excerpt from his classic beat generation novel, *On the Road)*

The beat generation, as some of you may know, was an American literary and cultural movement in the 1950s. It was an exciting challenge to orthodox culture, at a time when many people thought there was too much conformity, too many people living without much creativity or imagination. The beats, by contrast, were wild and free, as you can see from this excerpt from *Ôn the Road*, the most famous novel by the most famous beat writer. (The other leading beat writer was the poet Allen Ginsberg.)

On the Road was published in 1957, which is why you'll find some words in it that we wouldn't use today — Kerouac calls African-Americans "Negroes" and "colored." Negro, at that time, was considered a dignified, respectful term. Colored was not, and its use in a 1957 novel by a white man must have seemed old-fashioned and uncomfortable to many people even then.

One other way of speaking that we wouldn't use today is Kerouac's description of wild jazz harmony as "Chinese." In 1957, most non-Chinese Americans knew nothing about Chinese culture (even though there were millions of Chinese immigrants here). So "Chinese" could become a word for something strange or mysterious, even for things that had no connection with China. Now non-Asian Americans understand more about China (or I hope we do), and we wouldn't talk that way. I apologize for Kerouac calling jazz harmony "Chinese" in a novel written more than 60 years ago, and I hope the Chinese students in this class won't be offended. I apologize also for "colored," if anyone finds that offensive.

Jazz was the music of the beat generation, the music the beats loved, and were carried away by. The performance Kerouac describes may well have been one he really heard, since the novel is about things he really did. (Though some of it is made up; he "fictionalized" things in his life, as literary people would say).

I think it's clear that he doesn't know much about jazz, in any technical way. Though he does refer to Billie Holiday, perhaps the greatest of all jazz singers. But to me it's also clear that he understands the feeling of jazz, and at least in my opinion, he describes how a truly wild jazz performance — truly spontaneous, improvised with great excitement — can really feel. Jazz experts of course may disagree! All of you should decide what you think.

One last note. For Kerouac, writing was something like a jazz improvisation. He wanted his writing to be spontaneous. And though he did more editing — made more changes to his writing — than he liked to admit he did, most of what he wrote just poured out of him. In 1957, long before personal computers, people of course wrote on typewriters, which meant that when they came to the end of the page, they had to take the what they'd written out of the machine and put in a new sheet of paper. Kerouac didn't like that! He didn't want to be interrupted. So he invented a way to use a continuous roll of paper, rather than individual sheets. That way, he could keep on typing with no interruptions, while inspiration surged through him.

"Mystic Eyes" (1965)

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

Optional listening:

"Mystic Eyes"

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

Some people might think this is crazy, that Greil is describing things that aren't really there. And that he's destroying the boundary between an objective understanding of music, and his subjective feelings about it. And yet when I listen to the song, I think Greil is exactly right about what happens. Which for me means that in his own special way he's completely objective, and by highlighting his feelings helps us understand real things in the music that all of us can hear.

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

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

This is a press release from one of the leading classical music publicity companies, one that works with classical music superstars. It's a good example of how these releases 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?

September 25

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 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 that 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,* from the Bible — which the oratorio is based on — literary rather than religious). And both critics think the musical works aren't as good as their literary source.

But they handle their opinions very differently. Both critics, for instance, say that the composers they're reviewing have great professional skill. But Shaw doesn't care about that. He just cuts to what he thinks is the chase. Is this oratorio anywhere near as good as the *Book of Job?* 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.

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?

October 2

Music criticism: more Shaw

Reading assignment:

"Municipal Bands and Opera Tricks" (excerpt, about a performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto*)

"Herr Mottl's Insight" (about a German conductor of Shaw's time, Felix Mottl)

Notes on this reading

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

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

October 9

Music criticism: Virgil Thomson's music reviews (written 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: there were many daily newspapers in New York in those years, and most of them are gone)

Reading assignment:

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

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

Which way of writing do you like better? And — putting your own view of Heifetz aside, if you have one — which review do you think you’d be more likely to believe, if you read them when they were published, and didn’t know Heifetz?

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

“Gloomy Masterpiece**”**

This review is very favorable. But it raises fascinating questions about objectivity. Thomson certainly praises the piece. But do you think he really likes it? And if he doesn’t, why do you think he writes such a favorable review? (Note, by the way, that when Thomson wrote this review, performances of the Berg concerto were very rare.)

October 16

Music criticism: more Thomson

Reading assignment:

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

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

“Equalized Expressivity” (about Artur Schnabel)

“Dramatizing the Structure” (about Clifford Curzon)

“Warm Welcome” (about Myra Hess)

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

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

October 23

Press releases

Assignment due next week, on Friday, November 1. Please write a review of music I’ll put online. I’ll email the links.

Please e-mail this and all other assignments to me at greg@gregsandow.com. 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.

Reading assignment:

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

Three posts from my blog:

"Bad Press Releases"

"A Bad Caramoor Press Release"

"How to Write a Press Release"

> You already know that I don't like the standard way of writing press releases. I don't think it tells us anything that would make us care about an artist or a performance. And isn't that why you send out a press release — to make people care?
>
> Do you agree with my criticism? And do you like the alternatives I proposed in the third of these blog posts, about how I think releases might be written?

Some press releases (I like some of them and don't like others, but you should make up your own mind):

Carnegie Hall

San Francisco Symphony 2007 season announcement

Young Concert Artists season preview — as they used to write it

Young Concert Artists season preview — as they wrote it last year

Andrew Rangell

Michael Gordon's *Timber*

> Some of these press releases are the normal kind. But others are more expressive. Which ones did you enjoy reading, and which didn't you like?
>
> Notice also that some of the more expressive press releases include graphics, while the more orthodox tend not to. Do you think graphics make a press release livelier and perhaps more appealing? Or do you think they make a release seem unprofessional, because it looks less serious?

October 30

Program notes

First paper due — your review of music I've put online.

> **Again,** please e-mail this and all other assignments to me at greg@gregsandow.com. And remember that you have to email me in advance if you have to be late.

Assignment due next week, at our next class, on November 6: Prepare a short, informal presentation — just five minutes long — about a piece you love, maybe something you yourself play (though you can choose something you don't play, if you want to). You'll give this presentation in class.

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

Reading assignment:

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

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

Michael Steinberg, program note for Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (written for the New York Philharmonic in — I think — the 1980s)

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

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

I tried to write a program note that anyone could read, whether or not they have a classical music background. I wanted to make the *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 don't know if I've seen other artists doing this. Normally program notes reflect what the writer thinks, with the musicians not represented at all. But we're hearing the music as the musicians want it to go. So maybe we should know what they're trying to do. I have to say that I like Franz's approach. What do you think of it?

Anderson and Roe (a terrific piano duo), program note for a concert they gave at the National Gallery in Washington

November 6

Presentations due. You'll give yours in class, and we'll all discuss them. If there's not time for everyone, we'll continue next week.

November 13

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? Or, if you're a composer, why should they come to hear music you write?

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 does 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.

November 20

Artist bios

Reading assignment:

Some orthodox bios:

Afiara String Quartet

Yefim Bronfman

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

Some less orthodox approaches:

Misha Penton (soprano, experimental vocal composer, new music and new opera vocal artist, director, writer, and media/visual artist, in Houston)

Megan McDuffee (film composer)

Jeffrey Nytch (composer, director of the \Entrepreneurship Center for Music at the University of Colorado, Boulder)

Anne Midgette (my wife, from her blog)

Paul Haas (composer, conductor, installation artist, meditation teacher, and homesteader who grows his own food; the link takes you to his homepage, and to find his bio, either click "bio" on the navigation buttons, or scroll downward)

November 27

No class. Thanksgiving week.

December 4

Rock criticism

There's no 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.

Paper due next week, on December 11. Please write your own bio, and write a brief program notes for a piece you perform. Or if you're a composer, write a program note for a piece you've written.

When you write the 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, email this to me at greg@gregsandow.com. And again remember that if you're going to be late, you absolutely must let me know in advance, and arrange another due date.

December 11

More on rock criticism

Bio and program notes due.

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 18

Final discussion