

SPEAKING OF MUSIC: HOW TO TALK AND WRITE ABOUT IT

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[email me](#)

[website \(needs updating\)](#)

[the blog I used to write on the future of classical music](#)

[class schedule and assignments](#)

Why this course?

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

It can help us as musicians

We can get better at describing pieces and performances we hear, so that other people understand what we've heard, and know why we liked it (or didn't).

We can get better at telling musicians we're working with how we want a passage to go, or why we do or don't like a piece someone thinks we should perform. We can do this in a way that makes our feelings known, but also shows respect for anyone who disagrees.

It can help us with our careers

Why should people come to our performances? Why should anyone book us to give performances, or, if we're composers, commission us to write a piece?

They'll do these things if they think they'll like the music we make. And to help them think they might like it, we should describe our musicmaking in clear, lively, and convincing ways. So that what we say and write about ourselves is compelling, and tells a story that's uniquely our own.

What we do in the course

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

And here's the work we'll do:

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

I'll play all kinds of music in class, and we'll all do our best to describe how it sounds, and why we do or don't like it. Some of us might be tentative at first, but we'll all get better at doing this (including me, because I never stop learning).

We'll study various kinds of music-related writing

We'll read music reviews, because one of the main jobs of a music critic is to describe music in words. We can learn from how the good ones do it.

I know about music criticism because I used to be a critic, writing about both classical music and pop for major publications. And my wife, Anne Midgette, has also been a critic. She wrote for two of the top newspapers in the U.S., the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, where she was chief classical critic.

Now we've both moved on to other things. Anne is writing a novel, and is much in demand for online discussions, and as a guest on classical music podcasts. I've composed, and worked on projects involving the future of classical music, which became my professional specialty. It's the subject of my spring semester course, *Breaking Barriers: Classical Music in an Age of Pop*. If you're curious, there's an overview of it [online](#).

We'll also read other kinds of writing about music, some of it very unusual, from novels and other sources.

And then we'll look at career-oriented writing — press releases, program notes, and artist biographies. These are things you may find you need for your careers. If you need them, you'll either write them yourselves or have them written for you. Even if you don't write them, it's good to know how they're written, so you can judge whether what someone else writes describes who you really are, and whether it'll interest the people who read it.

This writing has always been important, but right now it's even more so. First, because this is an age of entrepreneurship, in which you may find yourself making your careers in unique new ways. Which means you'll have to find new ways to describe what you do.

And then this is a time when classical music is in crisis, when we need to find a new audience. To do this, we have to make what we do really interesting to people, which means finding lively ways to describe it. (In my spring semester course, we talk a lot about why we have to find a new audience, and how we might do it.)

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

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

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

These presentations will be just five minutes long, and should be informal. I know that everyone isn't equally comfortable speaking in public, even in a classroom. But after many years of teaching this course, I've seen that just about everyone succeeds. Almost everyone gives these talks in a personal, interesting way.

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

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

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

You'll write two short papers.

One will be a music review, to give you practice at describing music at greater length than we do in class. I'll put some music online, and you'll write a review of it.

In the second paper, you'll try something very practical — writing your own bio (a short word for your artist biography), and writing a program note for a piece you perform. Or, if you're a composer, for a piece you've written. Because this isn't specifically a course about writing — and because I know that English might not be everyone's first language — I'll care more about the ideas you express than about your writing ability. But sometimes I might point out small ways in which your writing can improve. And if you'd like to learn to write better, I'll be happy to help.

You'll find these assignments on Canvas, and you'll send your work to me there. I need to get that work on time, on or before the due date. If you send me something after the due date, I might not accept it, unless you've contacted me in advance. So if you know you'll be late with an assignment — for some very good reason — please let me know, and we'll arrange to have it due later.

You'll have short written assignments after most of our classes

And I mean short! For some of them, you can just write a paragraph or two.

Why these assignments? I've found I get to know you better by giving them. And you, in turn, will have more chance to talk with me about things we talk about in the course. So after most of our classes, I'll put a question on Canvas for you to answer, and I'll also email it to you.

These won't be exam questions, with right and wrong answers. Instead, I'll ask you questions about what you thought about the assignment for that week, and about what we talked about in class.

This is your chance to give me your opinions, whether or not you agree with things I've said. And it's a chance for us to talk more about what you think, since I'll often respond to you, either in writing or in the next class.

About the music criticism we'll read:

You'll read some of my reviews, because if I'm going to tell you how I think music should be described, you have a right to see how I've done it.

Then we'll read reviews by three critics I admire. One of them is my wife, who during her time at the *Washington Post* was widely honored as one of the world's best writers on classical music. She was also notable as an outstanding woman in a field traditionally dominated by men.

The other two are important figures from the past — George Bernard Shaw, best known as a great playwright, who wrote in London during the 1890s, and Virgil Thomson, a leading American composer, who wrote in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. Both were lively, distinctive, and wonderful at describing music. And (like Anne and me, as you'll see) they could be very detailed when they said why they liked something, or why they didn't.

They also said exactly what they thought. If they didn't like something, there was no way you wouldn't know it.

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

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

Should classical critics do that? That's a fascinating question, especially at a time when classical music may not seem relevant to most peoples' lives. How can we make it relevant? Do we say enough about why we think it's powerful, about how it changes our lives, and about what it might mean to others?

Maybe we should do that more. Though that's really a topic for my spring semester course, where we talk about it quite a lot.

How you're graded

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

But the most important part of your grade will be based how you approach this course, on how you work at describing the music I'll play, and how you react — both in class, and in your written work — to the assignments I'll give you.

You'll find that I'm eager to hear anything you want to say. And also that I won't judge you. What I care about is how hard you work to get better at everything we do, at whatever level you've reached.

Juilliard's attendance policy

You'll find Juilliard's official attendance policy at the end of this overview. When you read it, you'll see that there are two kinds of absences from class. Of course, you may know this already. An unexcused absence is when you just don't show up. And an excused absence is when you tell you can't be in class because of illness, injury, or a family emergency, and I say it's OK. Or when you miss class because of a Juilliard

activity, like an orchestra rehearsal, or because you have professional leave, approved by me and by the school. Note that absences because of lessons or coaching sessions are considered unexcused.

The policy says that if you have more than two unexcused absences, your grade should be lowered. And if you miss more than three classes, excused or unexcused, you can't get credit for the course. You can find further details in Juilliard's document, which I've added at the end of this overview.

If you're having trouble of some kind that makes it difficult for you to come to class, please reach out to me, and we'll see what can be done.

One last word

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

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

Juilliard policies

Juilliard asks me to include what follows, covering many things beyond attendance:

Adding and Dropping Classes. The final day to drop a course (without it appearing in your transcript) is **September 7**. After this date, the policy regarding "dropping classes," as listed in the catalog under [Schedule Changes](#), will apply. The deadline to request a withdrawal is **October 7**. The Academic Calendar may be found on the website under [Campus Life](#).

Attendance. Attendance is required at Juilliard for all classes and class-related activities. For academic courses, attendance will be graded according to the policies summarized below (the full policy is available on MyJuilliard under [Academic Affairs](#)).

Grading. In each semester, grades in courses meeting 1 time per week will be lowered to the next grade level (i.e., A to A-, A- to B+, etc.) with **each unexcused absence after the second**; grades in courses meeting 2 times per week will be lowered to the next grade level (i.e., A to A-, A- to B+, etc.) with **each unexcused absence after the third**. (For grades in courses that have a lab component and therefore meet 3 times per week, please see the full attendance policy on [MyJuilliard](#)). Attendance will be taken at the beginning of class. Any student who arrives after attendance is taken will be marked "late." Three late arrivals to class or early departures from class constitute one unexcused absence.

Students will receive a grade of Insufficient Attendance (IA) if they accrue more than the following number of **excused or unexcused absences**:

- Courses meeting 1 time per week: 3 absences maximum (excused or unexcused).
- Courses meeting 2 or more times per week: 6 absences maximum (excused or unexcused).

For classes with a lab component

- the attendance policy for courses meeting 1 time per week applies to the *lab*;
- the attendance policy for courses meeting 2 or more times per week applies to the *class*.

Exceeding the maximum number of absences in **either** component—three or six absences respectively—will result in an IA in the course.

Absences. Absences may be excused or unexcused according to the descriptions below. **Cases where excused absences have been obtained under false pretense constitute academic fraud and immediately will be referred to the Academic Conduct Committee.**

- Absences due to illness, injury, family emergency, and approved professional leaves **may be excused** at the instructor's discretion. Students who intend to take an excused absence in observance of a religious holiday not officially recognized by the school must inform their instructor at the start of the semester of their intention to do so. Absences due to concerns about COVID-19 or COVID-19

exposure also **may be excused**. Students experiencing any COVID-related symptoms should immediately complete the COVID-19 reporting form (available [here](#)).

- Absences for lessons, coachings, and unofficial rehearsals are considered **unexcused**, as are absences due to early departures for, or late returns from, vacations, whether for reasons of reduced travel cost or for another reason.

Juilliard-Mandated Absences. Juilliard-mandated absences include absences required for Juilliard programming and absences due to required quarantine or isolation periods. An absence is considered mandated by Juilliard only if the instructor receives official notification from the school to excuse the absence. Juilliard-mandated absences are both excused *and* exempted from the maximum number of allowable absences cited below.

Academic Integrity Policy. Academic integrity is a core value that ensures respect for the academic reputation of The Juilliard School, its students, faculty and staff, and the degrees it confers. Juilliard expects that students will conduct themselves in an honest and ethical manner and respect the intellectual work of others. Students are required to adhere to the policies listed in the catalog under [Academic Policies](#). More details about academic integrity, plagiarism, and how to prevent plagiarism can be found in MyJuilliard under [Academic Integrity](#).

Office of Academic Support and Disability Services (OASDS). [OASDS](#) provides tutoring (in collaboration with Academic Affairs) and disability support services via accommodations to students with qualified disabilities.

[Academic Support](#): Students in need of tutoring should first inquire with their instructor, the head of the relevant department, Academic Affairs, or OASDS. A reasonable out-of-pocket rate may be required unless a financial or documented disability-related need is determined, in which case Juilliard will cover the cost. Tutoring for writing is also available through the [Writing and Communication Center](#).

For tutoring resulting from a disability need, students must 1. request tutoring directly with the instructor or OASDS; and 2. have a completed [Tutorial Contract](#) on file with OASDS (signed by the instructor, tutor, and the student).

[Disability Services](#): The Juilliard School is committed to providing equal access to and participation in Juilliard's campus and educational programs. **OASDS offers confidential support to all students with temporary or permanent disabilities**, including but not limited to emotional, medical, mental health, or physical health-related issues and other functional barriers. Any confidential information obtained to arrange disability accommodation is in no way associated with or included in the student's permanent educational record. To receive disability accommodation, students must first participate in a confidential disability accommodation request process. If the request is approved, OASDS will issue an official disability accommodation letter, by way of the student, to either the student's instructor or a member of staff. Disability accommodation is not retroactive and only begins once the instructor or staff member has received an accommodation letter.

For assistance with disability accommodation visit www.juilliard.edu/oasds, contact OASDS by emailing oasds@juilliard.edu, call 212 799 5000 ext. 320, or visit OASDS in suite 245B.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB). The Office of EDIB is committed to supporting all students, faculty, and staff in creating equitable and inclusive learning and working environments. We center community building, collaboration, and challenges as opportunities for growth. These values are upheld by continuous learning, and the office acts as a resource for the community. More information about the Office of EDIB is [available here](#).

The Bias Response and Title IX Office (B-TIX). B-TIX oversees and administers the [Non-Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#) and [Sexual Misconduct Policy](#), which details Juilliard's reporting and response options, community and school resources, and rights extended to all members of the Juilliard Community. These policies prohibit discrimination, harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, and retaliation. B-TIX staff are neutral, trained individuals who manage response, make referrals to specialized resources, and are available to answer questions and receive reports of prohibited behavior.