

SPEAKING OF MUSIC: HOW TO TALK AND WRITE ABOUT IT

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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 that 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 ourselves and our musicmaking in a clear, lively, and convincing way. So that what we 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'll find online, if you follow the link. 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 — as chief classical critic — for the *Washington Post*. 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 music, 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](#).

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 career-oriented 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 unique 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 describe what we do in lively, interesting ways. (In my spring semester course, we talk a lot about why we have to find a new audience, and how we can do it. You can follow the link to find out more about 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 doing this. But after many years of teaching this course, I've seen that just about everyone succeeds. Just about 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 your 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 gave them for the first time last year, when of course we did our classes on Zoom. Juilliard told the faculty that students couldn't be given credit for attending a Zoom class just because they showed up on the Zoom grid. They had to do extra work. This was because of rules for online teaching set by American universities and the U.S. federal government.

So I began giving short assignments after every class. And something wonderful happened. I got to know my students better than I ever had, in more than 20 years of teaching. And my students, in turn, had more chance to talk with me than the students I'd taught in previous years.

That's why I'm continuing these assignments now. After most of our classes, I'll put a question on Canvas for you to answer. 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 I gave you, and what we talked about in class. This is your chance to give me your opinions, whether or not they agree with mine. 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, and also 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. When we talk about classical music, both among ourselves and to the rest of the world, do we say enough about why we think it's powerful, and how it might change the lives of people who listen to it?

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 to the writing we'll read, both in class and in your written assignments.

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. An unexcused absence is when you just don't show up. And an excused absence is when you tell me why you can't be in class, and I say it's OK. Or when you miss class 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. 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

As I said, I'm required to include these. **You'll see that the full attendance policies (which I summarized earlier) are listed in a separate document, which I've added after this one.**

Here's what Juilliard asks me to include, covering many things beyond attendance:

Adding and Dropping Classes. The final day to drop a course (without it appearing in your transcript) is **September 8**. After this day, the policy regarding "dropping classes," as listed in the catalog under [Schedule Changes](#), will apply. The deadline to request a withdrawal is **October 8**. The Academic Calendar may be found on the website under [Campus Life](#).

Attendance. Attendance is required for all classes and class-related activities and is factored into each student's final grade. 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**, and grades in courses meeting 2 or more 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**. 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**:

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

Required absences for rehearsals for Juilliard orchestra, dance, drama, opera, and other major productions (as indicated in official college requests sent to faculty members) are not counted toward the maximum number of allowable absences cited above. **On the other hand, absences**

for lessons, coachings, and unofficial rehearsals are considered unexcused. The full policy is found in MyJuilliard under [Academic Affairs](#).

Absences. Absences incurred in observance of a religious holiday not officially recognized by the School may be excused. Students who intend to take an excused absence in observance of a holiday must inform their instructor at the start of the semester of their intention to do so and be prepared to make up any assignments or work missed as a result of the absence. Scheduled due dates for coursework must be honored even where the absence has been excused.

Students feeling unwell or experiencing any COVID-related symptoms (including but not limited to coughing, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fever, sore throat, or loss of sense of smell) should not attend class or any other activity in person, even if the symptoms are mild. They should notify their instructor as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for completing assignments.

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](#).

Academic Support and Accessibility Services. The Office of Academic Support and Disability Services ([OASDS](#)) offers tutoring for students (in collaboration with Academic Affairs and the appropriate department) and disability support services to students with qualified disabilities.

Academic Support. Students in need of tutoring should inquire with their instructor, department head, OASDS, or Academic Affairs. For Liberal Arts courses and many music courses, tutoring is available through the [Writing and Communication Center](#). Tutoring in other areas may be arranged within each department. For cases of special tutoring, students will be required to submit a completed Tutorial Contract request form signed by an instructor or department head. The Tutorial Contract request form is available via OASDS. Students receiving special tutoring may need to pay a reasonable rate out-of-pocket unless a financial or documented disability-related need is determined, in which case, The Juilliard School will cover the cost. Please reach out to OASDS or Academic Affairs for further details.

Disability Services. The Juilliard School is committed to providing access and the opportunity to participate on an equal basis in Juilliard's educational programs. OASDS offers support to students with temporary or permanent disabilities, including medical, mental, emotional, or physical health-related issues, and other functional barriers. If you need disability accommodations, please 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). Juilliard is committed to the diversity of the School community and strives to foster an environment that is inclusive, supportive, and welcoming to all. This means working actively and intentionally to deepen the dialogue on equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) and address the institutional structures of systemic injustice that shape the performing arts industry. This central [commitment](#) to EDIB is

essential to delivering on Juilliard's mission to provide the highest caliber of artistic education to students and shape the future of the performing arts.

Statement of Non-Discrimination. The Juilliard School does not discriminate, or tolerate discrimination, on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, religion, age, veteran status, gender identity, marital status, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic protected by law (collectively, "Protected Classes") in its educational programs and activities, admissions, or employment, as required by Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the New York State Education Law, the New York State Human Rights Law, and other applicable laws and school policies.

Non-Discrimination and Harassment Policy. Juilliard's [Non-Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#) offers a range of reporting and resolution options for community members and is an essential element of the School's [EDIB](#) initiatives. More information about the policy, including how to report, is available [here](#).

Sexual Misconduct Policy. Juilliard's [Sexual Misconduct Policy](#) is a comprehensive resource that includes information about support services, reporting, rights, and response procedures. For more information about [Title IX](#), [contact](#) the Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Title IX Coordinator. *Please note that faculty and staff, except for Health and Counseling Services staff, are required to notify the Title IX Coordinator of any allegations of sexual misconduct.*