

Writing to Learn in the Music and Theatre Department

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Imagine yourself in a classroom, as a student, and the teacher of the Intro to Music course tells you he's going to put on a bestselling CD of 1994 and then ask you to do a freewrite. He starts up the CD and out of the sound system comes a soothing flow of chanting Benedictine monks, the rhythm loose and flexible, the melody without surprises, rising gracefully like a large tranquil bird and then floating down to rest for a moment before rising upward again and again.

“Okay,” says the professor, “what does this music bring to mind? What does this music suggest to you?” And so you freewrite, stopping occasionally to listen more carefully and to search inward for the words *to* express what is happening in your mind.

This is one way Robert Swift uses writing to draw students more deeply into their listening experiences and beyond, into the insights of reflection. The following compilation describes several other ways writing is used by faculty of the Music and Theatre Department for teaching their disciplines.

Concert Reviews

Students attend musical performances and write up their observations or critiques. Jonathan Santore, who teaches an Intro to

Reading Music course for non-majors writes:

I'm very interested in students experiencing the performance of live music (from rock concert to faculty recital to religious service to a night at a bar to dinner accompaniment) as fully as possible--I hope to move them from passive listening to active listening. In order to facilitate this, I specifically ask them to take note of the entire experience—what role is the music actually playing in what's going on? How's the audience responding to it? What does the audience seem to think its role in the proceedings is—how are they dressed, when do they clap, do they shout and if so when, etc.? I welcome specific musical commentary, but don't require it. Those students who are practicing musicians invariably surprise me with the perception of their comments—for example, a weekend guitarist in a punk band commenting at length on the relative merits of one student ska band over another.

Others assign concert reviews as well. Margot Swift's Music Skills students attend a musical event of their choice at the Silver Cultural Arts Center and comment on the performance, "giving their impressions of all aspects of the work," and Robert Swift's Intro to Music students "attend three live music performances and write critiques, the focus of the critiques being the melody, form, and rhythm of the music, and the balance between the solo and accompanists."

Performance Reviews

Performance reviews are for peers who perform, to help those persons improve. Kathleen Arcchi, in her voice classes, uses performance comment sheets that ask student reviewers to respond to the following: Tone Quality, Intonation, Technique, Interpretation/Communication, Stage Deportment, and Other. A sample response for Technique: "You lost a few words, but the softness might have been part of that. You put the intensity into

the softness. Sounded wonderful. Proves you don't need to be loud to make a song fill a room" (Melissa Hunt). A sample for Intonation: "Pulling back on volume doesn't mean cutting back on intensity. Go with sensations—if you feel a buzz, work with that buzz—it will help you find that place" (Katie Ludwig).

Teacher Observations

Robert Swift has students observe peers teaching secondary school music classes. The observers give a numerical grade of the teaching and write up a paragraph or two of supporting observations. In class Swift uses freewrites, such as "Think of one of the best teachers you ever had (music or otherwise) and what is it about that teacher you still remember. Try to write about one specific incident of this person's teaching that you remember." From writing and sharing these observations, a class discussion is generated on what makes good teachers.

Dramatic Writing

Students learn about the arts of playwriting and screenwriting by doing it. In dramatic writing courses, Paul Mroczka has his students do regular exercises for homework, as well as intensive assignments in class.

Responses to Dramatic Writing

Paul Mroczka writes:

In some survey courses of drama, I have used writing portfolios with great success. The portfolio is a collection of essays, poems, dramatic pieces, etc., which serve as reactions to plays we have read and discussed. Each student writes 7-9 reactions; they then go through peer review in class; and then students select which of their pieces they will rewrite and include in their portfolio (which is usually five pieces). Portfolios include a banner statement, a table of contents, and a title page.

In classes such as World Drama, Modern European, and American Drama, I give students the choice of writing a traditional research paper or a creative paper. Most choose the creative paper, which may be a burlesque of a play we've studied, a dialogue between two or three writers from different periods, a "where are they now" paper on characters 20 years after the play has ended, etc. These tend to be creative and revealing for students—showing how much they really understand and bringing new light to subjects.

Performance Studies Notebooks

Voice students of Kathleen Arecchi's at the 100-400 levels keep a performance studies notebook in which they write, according to the assignment sheet, "verbatim (word for word) translations of texts of each foreign language song studied during the semester; phonic (IPA) spellings of the text for both foreign language and English; a paraphrasing, in English, of each text, English texts as well as foreign; and a brief historical sketch of your character (in the song or aria), leading up to the time you express yourself in the song or aria being studied." Arecchi says that "the purposes of this exercise is to acquaint students with varied ways of approaching the study and interpretation of vocal literature through analysis of text and music and the application of acting techniques, as well as to explore ways of personalizing material while fulfilling the composer's content."

Also included in the performance studies notebook is "a paragraph giving a brief biographical sketch of the composer of each song or aria and any significant information about the song or aria studied (is it from a song cycle? what opera or oratorio? etc.)."

Program Notes

Kathleen Arecchi's students design and write the program notes for their senior recitals. These programs, distributed to

members of the audience, might include biographical information about the composers whose works are about to be performed.

Research Papers: Biography and Musical Analysis

Dan Perkins assigns, in his Music History course, a 6-10 page research paper on a composer and a specific piece by that composer that is particularly relevant to music history. The paper must have both a biographical section on the composer and a musical analysis section on the specific piece, like the writing music historians and critics do in scholarly journals and books.

Besides the requirements of the actual paper, the assignment has the requirements of a basic writing process built into it. Students must have their topic approved by Dr. Perkins, write a draft, share that draft with a writing consultant at the College Writing Center, pass a draft to Dr. Perkins for his comments, and then submit a final draft for a grade. As Perkins says, “It’s a good learning experience for students who didn’t know how to go through an editing process, who used to just write a draft and consider it sacred.”

Formal Musical Analysis

Jonathan Santore writes:

In the first four semesters of the theory/analysis cycle for music and music ed. majors, short prose assignments are interspersed with assignments in musical composition and harmonic analysis. In the fifth semester, our focus shifts almost exclusively to formal analysis—prose discussion of the overall shape of entire movements, works, etc. The final assignment in this course is a five-page paper analyzing a short work of the student’s choice—any period, any style. One of the five pages can be a graphic rendering of the work’s overall form; the rest of the paper should consist of detailed, grammatically and orthographically precise discussion of the musical glue which holds the work together,

which gives it shape in musical space.

One of my favorite papers in recent years analyzed a long “jam” by Phish; the student who wrote the paper pointed out that this lengthy, ostensibly free-form improvisation was held together by a steady underlying rhythmic pulse which, despite its reinterpretation in various time signatures throughout the piece, never changed. He discussed the means by which this pulse was established and reinterpreted, and also commented on the perceptual tension between the improvisatory nature of the work’s harmonic and melodic materials and its tightly controlled rhythmic framework.

Was it this tension which drew him to the piece in the first place? Is it the presence of this deep musical structure which explains Phish’s success? I dunno. However, it’s the verbalization of these issues which affords us deeper understanding of an essentially non-verbal art form. The whole point of my primary teaching discipline, music theory, is the elucidation of musical structure. The verbal description of the ineffable is a central part of this discipline.