INTRODUCTION TO WRITING ANALYTICAL ESSAYS

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William Marvin has taught at Oberlin College and has recently returned to the Eastman School of Music, where he earned his doctorate. While a graduate student at Eastman he received two teaching awards: the Outstanding Graduate Teaching Prize (1990) and the Edward Peck Curtis Award for Excellence in Teaching by a Graduate Student (1992). He is especially active in developing aural skills training for undergraduates.

Marvin's research has involved a Schenkerian approach to tonality and form in operas by Wagner and Mozart. He has also focused attention on aural training in tonal and post-tonal music and the quodlibet as a contrapuntal device in Broadway musicals. He has published in Music Theory Online, the electronic journal of the Society for Music Theory, and the Journal of Musicology.

In this essay, Marvin's love of teaching and learning comes forth as he combines essential elements about writing prose with a deep regard for music's power and complexity to both the performer and the analyst.

Writing about music is comparable to performing music in that both require many hours of behind-the-scenes work. Just as the rehearsals, coachings, and extended practice sessions are largely invisible to audiences when a performer takes the stage, so are the hours of brainstorming, analysis, and revision invisible to readers of the final version of an essay. All of the essays in this volume are written by professional music theorists with years, even decades, of experience in crafting analytic prose. Yet each essay was drafted, edited, rewritten, and revised again before it was ready for print.

Music students frequently question the relevance of writing essays. Writing about music helps to clarify your understanding of a piece. It also helps to organize your thoughts in a deeper, more meaningful way. Analytic essays, like oral presentations, exist for the simple purpose of persuading others of your ideas on how music can be heard. Oral presentations are like improvisations, whereas written analyses can be viewed as compositions. While a transcendent performance can also accomplish the goal of informing or persuading others, prose can reach a wider audience than is possible with a single ephemeral performance. Further, an analysis can be comparative in ways that a single performance never can: two interpretations cannot exist simultaneously in performance, but the possibility of two or more feasible interpretations lies at the heart of musical analysis. Clear thought about music and clear writing about music are related—if you have difficulty articulating your thoughts on paper, chances are that the thoughts themselves are unclear. The clarity of thought you seek will then reinforce your approach to performance; after committing your ideas to paper, new performance interpretations open up. In addition, given that performers in the twenty-first century are expected to include some form
of communication with their audience, whether verbally or in the form of program notes, analytic prose is one form of communication that is indispensable.

Writing, like musical technique and artistry, requires practice. The limited space here precludes a discussion of how to select a topic for analysis. Once the piece, pieces, or analytic problem(s) have been chosen, however, the following steps will guide your creativity and help you develop an essay that communicates your insights most effectively.

**Step One: Learn the Piece**

This may seem obvious, but successful communication presumes that you have made the composition(s) your own. This means hours of immersion in the score, recordings, live performances, and practicing. Think about what interests you in the piece. What puzzles you about it? What does the piece seem to convey to you? You will need to approach the piece as a performer as well as from aural and visual study. Regardless of your own performance skills, a physical relationship to the piece through singing, playing, or both as well as multiple listenings is an essential prerequisite to being articulate about its formal and expressive features.

**Step Two: Begin to Analyze**

There is no single approach for every piece, and most pieces can be understood by numerous analytic methods. However, you should consider the following questions about virtually any composition you choose:

1. What is the form of the piece, or how do you describe its parts and their relationships to each other?
3. What is the temporal organization of the piece, from the smallest level of pulses and subdivisions to the larger motions of phrase and hypermeter?
4. What is extraordinary, strange, unusual, or anomalous about the piece? Or, what feature of the work drew you to examine this piece closely?

Keep in mind that analysis involves detours and dead ends, just like your practicing can, and also that your final essay should not contain everything that you have learned, just as your various performance interpretations can never all be projected simultaneously; in other words, you must make choices. Perhaps most important: analysis is more than merely slapping labels on a piece of music. Analysis should articulate your most profound insights about the music’s organization and meaning through your interpretation of the facts.

**Step Three: Research (When Possible)**

Find out what else has been written about your chosen topic. This is part of your continual personal growth as a musician. Everything you read and hear contributes to this and can then be brought to bear on your own analysis and writing.
Step Four: Form a Thesis

Nothing is less interesting to read (or write) than a chronological description of what happens within a piece. After you have analyzed extensively, you will have a better idea about what is normative (i.e., aspects of the piece that are common to many other pieces) and what is unusual and special about the work(s) under consideration. Your knowledge of music theory and your experience of other repertoire play a central role here. For example, the bass line C–G–C–G–C in a C-major piece will be ignored as a completely standard cadential pattern, but an extended passage in E minor in the same piece will stand out to you as significant and worth discussing. Insights on what such an unusual tonal area might mean are the types of ideas that will provide a conceptual framework for your essay. Such ideas, when developed as the organizing thesis in your paper, will draw the reader toward the most interesting and compelling musical features. Frequently, these issues are also the problematic elements of interpretation: an aspect of the piece that is puzzling to you will often lead you to an ideal topic for discussion, and such issues tend to be difficult in performance (because they are not clear).

Step Five: Write

This is actually a misnomer; rather, this step involves organizing and presenting your findings. Successful presentation involves more than just writing coherent prose. Consider how diagrams, charts, or annotated musical examples can communicate your analysis more effectively and efficiently than prose, and then use words to highlight and augment what is already presented in graphic form. Technical terms are important for good writing; they can simplify the prose and keep your points succinct. Even so, it is important to know your audience: some terminology will be fine for a given reader or listener (such as your teacher!) but inappropriate for others (as at a talk to a lay audience).

Organize and outline the essay before you start presenting your findings—this will prevent your analysis from turning into a meaningless hodgepodge of facts about the piece. Finally, cite the work of other scholars when appropriate. Just as you would not submit as your own an audition tape played by someone else, you may not quote or paraphrase other authors without acknowledging the ideas as belonging to them.

Step Six: Revise, Revise, Revise!

A musical performance does not spring fully formed from the head, voice, or fingers of a performer, and neither does an analytic essay jump directly onto the page in its final form. Reread your essay slowly, and aloud. You will hear problems in your writing that may not be as obvious when you see words on the page. Just like practicing, analysis and writing can sometimes feel unrewarding; all three activities are often best approached in short, intense sessions, because epiphanies or insights can and will occur when you least expect them. Further, try to read your prose objectively, putting yourself in the role of reader. As you read, make sure that every sentence is coherent and that it accurately expresses your ideas. Also determine whether the ideas follow one another logically. Revi-

1. Throughout this book, technical terms are presented in bold. Such terms are explained as they occur in essays and are defined again in the glossary. —Ed.

2. Inappropriate use of the work of others is called plagiarism. A more detailed discussion of this can be found in Richard J. Wingell, Writing about Music, 55–57 (see full citation cr. p. xiv). —Ed.
sion may mean correcting factual mistakes, changing the placement of sentences or paragraphs within your essay, adding material to clarify the logical steps of your argument, eliminating redundancies or statements that simply do not advance your ideas, or many other sorts of changes. Revisions will always be necessary in order to guarantee that you are presenting your best ideas most efficiently.

Ultimately, writing essays will help you understand how a given piece works and, if you are to perform it, how your understanding affects your performance. Just as ongoing performance preparation creates a deeper bond between you and the music, so writing about music helps forge a deeper connection as well.

FURTHER READING

Irvine, Demar. Irvine's Writing about Music. 3d ed. Revised and edited by Mark A. Radice. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1999. (This includes a valuable bibliography of other resources about writing.)