

## Music Then and Now

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**Y**ou might argue that the last thing a music student needs is a book. Perhaps for history, for literature, or for certain other matters in which language is actually the material being studied, written words are not only useful, but they are the matter at hand. For music, though, the material to study is invisible, it exists only in time, and it won't hold still. What could be the use of a book? Perhaps one could include scores, for courses in which students can be expected to read music. For my purposes—and here I'm addressing the question of non-majors taking their first and last music course ever, a book would essentially have words, pictures, maybe diagrams, but that is not what we're studying.

You might wonder whether the academy doesn't encourage a one-size-fits-all for all kinds of learning—teacher, classroom, book: just as in the Middle Ages, where a “lecture,” a *lectio*, was a reading, by someone who had a book, to a lot of people who didn't. What music students need is music and study. That is, listening and paying attention. Simple as that.

I'm the author of a recently-published music-appreciation textbook (*Music Then and Now*, W. W. Norton, 2012), and the process has required me to think a lot about why music students do have books, and what such books ought to contain. I had really hoped for a book that sings, some sort of object that produced the music just as you were reading about it, or following diagrams or listening charts or scores. The result comes pretty close—especially the online version—but we're not quite there yet; and perhaps we never will be, because no matter how fine the book, what music-appreciation students also need is a teacher. That teacher is a fellow listener, a fellow enthusiast, a person who can introduce fellow human beings to something new and wonderful.

With respect to music appreciation, I don't attach a lot of importance to sonata form, to style periods, to keys and circles of fifths. That's all useful, but only to people who already command a lot of music and want to make categories and descriptions. I don't honestly think that most people at a symphony concert, say, note the arrival at the dominant. I think they can hear areas of

tonal stability and of instability; I like to say that if you can't tell where you are, that's surely because the composer wants you to feel that way. Mostly I think students, majors and non-majors, need to own their music.

### First Nights

For years now I've taught a slightly unusual music-appreciation course called First Nights. Its basic hope is to send students away really owning a small number of pieces of music. It's my view that a lot of courses try to cram too much in, sensing a need to mention most of the great composers, genres, styles, periods, and so on: an impossible task. My First Nights course has just five pieces—but they are great ones—from the past, and one piece from the present. The idea is to consider these pieces, not as museum pieces revered for all the ages, but to consider what it was like to be at the first performances of these five pieces, when they were cutting-edge pieces of contemporary music, when nobody had ever heard them before. It allows for other times, cultures, and attitudes to be considered. It heightens the sense of now for students when they think of what else those audience members might have chosen to do on the same day instead of coming to hear this music; and it brings them closer to the music's contemporaries when they consider what those audience-members knew, what they were used to, that may be unfamiliar to us.

The five pieces? Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (Mantua, 1607); Handel's *Messiah* (Dublin, 1742); Beethoven, Symphony no. 9 (Vienna, 1824); Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique* (Paris, 1830), Stravinsky, *Le sacre du printemps* (Paris, 1913). They are classics, of course, and they go from late Renaissance to twentieth century: but mostly they are chosen because they have a hook; students know most of them—at least they've heard the "Hallelujah" chorus and the tune from the last movement; they may have seen the dinosaurs in *Fantasia* and know some Stravinsky; and even if they don't know the *Fantastique* it's an easy sell in the first lecture with that guillotine blade. *L'Orfeo* is in there because I love it. So the idea is that the students will say "Oh! I know that song," and will be able to get going on this stuff from the inside.

Another reason for choosing these pieces, though, is that they are pieces about whose first performance we have some good information. We can put ourselves in the place of the first listeners. The students have a batch of original texts translated into English for each of the pieces (diaries, newspaper articles, letters) so that they can try to reconstruct for themselves a picture of what it was like to be there.

The second point of the course (the first was to get the students to own the pieces) is an emphasis on performance: music is what people do so that they

or others can listen. It's something people *do*. So we emphasize those first performances, not the fifteen different CDs you can buy.

And then we commission our own First Night, a piece that is given its first performance at the last meeting of the class, preceded by a session of rehearsal and time for student questions for the composer and performers. The composer is new each year, and each year the students get surprisingly excited about bringing a new piece of art into the world, and they write a paper in which they give the sort of detail about this first performance that we wish we had for the five pieces from the past that we've studied. I generally present a bouquet of the most interesting papers to the composer, who is almost always delighted that people have paid such close attention to the music.

It's only six pieces—not very much in the great world of music. But there are other pieces like them, and these six can perhaps serve as telephone poles on which the listeners can string their own stylistic and historical wires. My hope is that when one of the six gets played in the student's home town, she or he will go, because “that's one of my pieces;” and there may be other interesting music on the program, the student—now concert-goer, may well attend other events, and that music may well contribute to making his or her life richer than before. I hope so.

There's a book that goes along with the course—it's called *First Nights* (Yale University Press), and it arises directly from my course, but it's not a textbook. It's just a book about five historical performances, with lots of pictures and interesting information, including dossiers of original documents. It was never really meant as a college textbook; it is a general-audiences book written for people who like music and who might like reading about these performances. It does not have test banks, PowerPoint slides, listening guides, streaming audio, or any of the other wonderful things that most textbooks provide. My students do read it, but they sometimes complain that it covers the same material as the lectures. That's an almost inevitable side effect of writing the book from the course, but it also allows me to spend a lot more time on music in the lectures, knowing that the historical and cultural side is there in the book.

First Nights has been taught at other universities, with greater or lesser success, and I am grateful to the many colleagues, some of them former students, who have adopted the idea that less is more, that a small repertory of pieces students can really get to know has the advantage of ownership rather than spectatorship.

The repertory is unapologetically classical. I make a point, in the first lecture, of saying that the world is full of music of all kinds, that in the United States you can find music from almost all the world's cultures, that lots of courses in the university deal with much of that music, and that nothing is

meant to privilege these works over any other music—it's just that these are favorites of mine, and that I'd like to introduce them to you.

### Then and Now

And now I've tried to adopt that concept in a textbook. It has been a very enlightening experience. For one thing, I needed to learn that even though I might choose to do something in a certain way, there might be very good reasons it wouldn't work elsewhere. There are many colleagues in our world who want very much to do the best job they can to get their students to love music, but who work in a variety of circumstances, under various kinds of pressure, and who deal with students of many different kinds. So although the textbook is mine in a sense, in another sense it belongs to a lot of people. Many generous colleagues read versions of the material, commented on the repertory and the writing, thought about listening guides and made suggestions, and so the resulting books has a much broader base, and is better informed than I could possibly be on my own.

Nevertheless, the basic two ideas are there: (1) Study fewer pieces, study whole pieces, and give students time with each; and (2) focus on performance, on *doing* it as much as listening to it.

So *Music Then and Now* is designed along those lines; it has separate chapters on individual pieces and their first performances; there are twenty chapters, and my idea was that in a thirteen- or fourteen-week semester an instructor might pick a piece a week from those on offer, and have time to concentrate pretty hard for that week. A week is not very long to study, say, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but it may be longer than the piece gets in a lot of courses. This book isn't trying to cover everything, but to give the instructor a chance to fashion a sort of in-depth look at some wonderful events in the past.

Here's a rundown of the contents:

1. Fundamentals (focusing on listening, and using examples from the pieces to come as teasers)

Medieval and Renaissance part opener (these set the stage with a bit of history, art, and music)

2. Medieval (Christmas mass in Paris, 1198)
3. Renaissance (an imaginary house party with William Byrd)

Baroque part opener

4. Monteverdi (*L'Orfeo* in Mantua)
5. Handel (*Messiah* In Dublin)

6. Bach (an imagined collegium concert, with suite, concerto, harpsichord music)

Classical part opener

7. Mozart (*Don Giovanni* in Prague)
8. Beethoven (Fifth Symphony in Vienna)
9. Schubert (an imaginary Schubertiade: songs, “Trout” Quintet)

Romantic part opener

10. Berlioz (*Symphonie fantastique*)
11. Mendelssohn (Violin Concerto in Leipzig)
12. Schumann (Clara Schumann plays Robert Schumann’s *Carnaval* in Paris)
13. Wagner (*Die Walküre* at Bayreuth)
14. Dvořák (“New World” Symphony in New York)

Twentieth century part opener

15. Stravinsky (*Le sacre du printemps*)
16. Berg (*Wozzeck*)
17. Messiaen (*Quatour pour la fin du temps* in Stalag VIIIA)
18. Bernstein (*West Side Story* in New York)
19. Coda: Twenty-First Century (consideration of *Doctor Atomic*)

Every reader, I’m sure, can improve this list; nobody agrees, of course, on what should be included, and what excluded, in such an exercise. In an ideal world, we’d have chapters available for any combination an instructor wanted, and we could put together a book to order. I hope, actually, that if there are future editions of this book they will consist of expansions, so that there are more chapters, and it will really be possible to order the book the way you want it. For now, this is a list based on a consensus of experienced people.

Not everybody agrees on everything, of course, and there’s a lot missing. Not many women here (there are singers, there’s talk of Hildegarde, of Fanny Mendelssohn, there’s Clara Schumann, and although that may be a fair representation of the underrepresentation of women in public music-making in the past, it’s nothing to be proud of); not many underprivileged people or people of color (issues of society and race arise in *Wozzeck* and *West Side Story*, but not at the level at which our world needs to consider those issues); not much world music, not much pop music. All true. These chapters represent real musical events (for the most part: you’ll note that a couple of them are fudged a little: Renaissance, Schubertiade), and that’s how life was.

One of the features of the book that I hope will be viewed positively is that it includes quite a number of videos of me talking about the pieces; seated at the piano, I try to get people a little bit excited about what's in each chapter. There is at least one video for each chapter; sometimes displaying violin virtuosity, sometimes explaining medieval notation, sometimes talking about the meter of "I want to be in America." There are also videos, from the Met, of the relevant portions of operas: *Don Giovanni*, *Die Walküre*, *Wozzeck*, and *Doctor Atomic*. These videos, performances and talks, are not just window dressing; they are attempts to make things live and lively, to remind people that music happens in real time, among real people. It's an attempt to make the book a little bit less of an object and more of a collaborator.

I write these words in the summer, and doing so makes me look forward to returning to the classroom, to meeting a roomful of new students, of trying once again to convince them of how lucky they are to be alive on a planet that has art.