# Review Essay: Guides to Writing about Music

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Musicologists are rarely trained to be instructors of English composition and rhetoric, but in the course of teaching, we often need to fill that role. As soon as we assign a paper—particularly a research paper or a concert review— we've entered the world of defining and teaching style, grammar, and the intricacies of writing about an aural art form. There are a number of books on the market that are designed to help us and our students in learning to write well about music, some of which I keep handy for myself even now.

**Jonathan Bellman. *A Short Guide to Writing about Music*, 2nd ed. New York: Pearson Education, 2007. 194 pages. $45.40.**
**ISBN 0-321-18791-1.**

Jonathan Bellman's *A Short Guide to Writing about Music* is part of Pearson Education's series of short guides on writing about different disciplines, including art, literature, biology, and film, among others. Bellman makes it clear that this book works hand-in-hand with style guides such as Strunk and White or Turabian rather than as a replacement for them, a wise caveat for all of the books in this review. He begins by grappling with the inevitable question: why write about music? After all, composers, critics, and scholars from Schumann to Jacques Barzun have struggled with the idea of writing about an art form that many believe should speak for itself. Bellman admits what we, as instructors, all know: music can be hard to describe, but "every writer has, potentially, something to contribute" (p. 2). Bellman's book is here to assist those writers in making their potential contributions appropriate, elegant, and well-styled. It is ideal for a course in which students will write several different kinds of pieces, providing guidelines and information about writing program notes and liner notes as well as press releases, abstracts, and research papers.

*A Short Guide* can be divided roughly in two sections. The first covers different kinds of writing about music and the various approaches to it. Bellman includes accessible coverage of research sources and techniques, as well as trends in criticism and analysis. His brief summaries of Marxist criticism, pseudo-Marxist Soviet criticism, cultural criticism, postcolonial criticism, and

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gender studies are outstanding, offering succinct explanations and pitch-perfect examples of the approaches discussed, including excerpts from works by Ellen Rosand, Sophie Fuller, and Lloyd Whitesell.

This part of the book is also useful for teaching students to write clearly and in a professional style, rejecting the vague, banal, and overly personal, as well as the anthropomorphizing of instruments, works, and other musical elements. Readers will learn to identify and understand the needs of their various audiences, think about musical and technical language and how to use it, and know how and when to appropriately incorporate musical examples and other materials into their writing. Bellman provides examples, both positive and negative, from a wide range of sources, so that students will know how to apply his guidance not just to Mozart and Haydn, but also to gamelan music, Jimi Hendrix, and Lady Gaga.

The second section of *A Short Guide* focuses on the research process. This section, starting with Chapter 6, walks the reader through the entire process of writing a research paper, from selecting a topic (and common pitfalls in doing so) to locating and evaluating sources, time management, and creating correct citations. The following chapter includes a complete research paper by an undergraduate student and a critique of it, pointing out what makes it a successful paper as well as what could have been improved.

Following the student paper, Bellman tackles "the meaning of style," offering up the idea that academic prose can be exciting and compelling—and proving it with a selection of examples from Alejandro E. Planchart and James Parakilas before dissecting traits of academic style for students ready to take their writing to a more sophisticated level. This part of the book examines complex sentence structure, the use of obscure or non-English terms, the first person plural, and passive voice, presenting examples of times when even these most-stereotyped of academic traits are not just permissible, but the better choice. Bellman digs into the nitty-gritty of usage here as well, discussing gender-neutral writing, the use of B.C.E and C.E. instead of B.C. and A.D., transitions, variety in word choice, punctuation, *that* versus *which*, and other details that students writing about music will need to know. A final chapter emphasizes the importance of keeping backup copies of work, setting up a manuscript, and the treatment of musical terms, abbreviations, titles, and examples. The chapter ends with a quick guide to citation including newer media like listserv communications, personal email, and websites. An index and writer's checklist (with questions like "Do I have something to say, and have I said it clearly and concisely, avoiding needlessly inflated language?" that every author should use before submitting an article or making a post to a listserv) complete the volume. Although aimed primarily at undergraduate students, Bellman's *A Short Guide to Writing about Music* is also appropriate for graduate students, particularly those who did not have significant or

satisfactory writing instruction as part of their undergraduate education or who are learning to write about music for the first time.

**Trevor Herbert. *Music in Words: A Guide to Researching and Writing about Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 256 pages. $19.95. ISBN (Paperback) 978-0-19-537373-8.**

Trevor Herbert's *Music in Words* was initially written for students preparing for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music in the UK and has subsequently been revised as a general guide for students in North America as well. It is formally divided into two parts: Part I covers the mechanics of writing and doing research, finding sources, and using illustrations; Part II discusses usage, tools for deeper research, and how to cite various forms of media. *Music in Words* is, like Bellman's *Guide*, written for a primarily undergraduate audience, but unlike the *Guide*, it is riddled with the kind of academic writing Bellman encourages students to avoid. Herbert indulges in complex sentences when short ones would do, uses more elaborate terms than are called for, and revels in the passive voice. For these reasons alone, *Music in Words* is suspect as a helpful reference for students. The constant use of the second person imperative, perhaps a holdover from the British editions that preceded this one—you must do this, you must do that—takes on a bullying or condescending tone early in the book that never lets up. Sometimes the advice given is contradictory: in the chapter "Using Libraries and the Internet," Herbert writes, "If you are uncertain of the basic terminology or have limited knowledge of the Internet, you would be well-advised to consult one of the books mentioned in the bibliography on the *Music in Words* website" (p. 63). If a student has limited knowledge of the Internet, why send the student online to look something up? Herbert's own writing also has a number of quirks that detract from the text: he is given to stating that what he is about to write is "obvious;" admits being "biased towards interpretation and performance" (p. 14); and retains some Britishisms that will make little sense to American readers, such as the concept of concert patrons buying a program.

Part I of *Music in Words* does provide brief coverage to kinds of writing students may do over the course of their careers—academic papers, written exams, CD liner notes, program notes, reviews, abstracts, and lectures—but it does not sufficiently address concerns of audience, writing style, or language for these forms. Herbert also includes a section called "Writing for the Internet," which focuses on copyright and what he calls "accessibility," which most scholars would term "aesthetics." He advises, for example, to avoid flashing images and "multicolored design" (33); true "accessibility" would explain how to make a student's website useful, for example, to the visually impaired by making sure it links to a text reader. Part I also contains an introduction to doing research. Some of this material is practical, but too

often bogged down in long explanations or abstract commentary. A bullet point on synthesis reads: "Here, you need to consider all of the information that you have obtained, including how it can be used to form an argument or exposition of your subject and whether it can be corroborated or should be refined or abandoned" (p. 39). It's not terrible writing, but students are certainly not going to find it easy to work through.

*Music in Words* is rather dated and is poorly organized. Herbert allows that he "cannot provide advice on how to deal with specific computer databases" (p. 43), and he doesn't seem to like them much either: he suggests students use index cards or an Excel-like spreadsheet for storing their research. However, he does make mention of RefWorks and EndNote some twenty pages later as examples of resources students might want to investigate. Citation information appears in both Parts I and II, and there are far too many parenthetical suggestions to look in other locations in the book for additional material on a topic. In Part II, the heading of "Periods" sends the user back to "Commas and Periods." The topic "Early Music" is ill-defined and sends users to "Historic and Historical" and "Period Performance," which are not very useful themselves. Recommendations are also outdated and often obscure relative to the general scope of this book, as Herbert thinks that students shouldn't attempt to use sources in foreign languages at all. Students are also given recommendations for the Duckles reference book, which hasn't been updated in almost fifteen years, and *The New Langwill Index*, cited as an "indispensible" reference on wind instruments but with which even experienced scholars are unlikely to be familiar.

The section on musical terms and phrases is idiosyncratic. Ranges and transpositions are given under the entry for "Horn," but for no other instruments. Folk, country, and country and western musics are lumped together as "U.S. forms that originally embodied the transmission of European folk song and later absorbed some commercial influences," (p. 141) but gospel is separated from religious, sacred, and liturgical music (p. 154). Curwen's tonic solfa system gets its own entry and a table of scale degree names, but solfège syllables do not.

Finally, the production quality for *Music in Words* is not particularly high. Many of the examples provided are also painfully dated and unprofessional, using the Comic Sans font and underlining rather than italicizing titles. Reproductions of figures from other books are smudgy, and examples and illustrations are inconsistent in both text font and musical engraving styles.

**Richard Wingell. *Writing about Music*: *An Introductory Guide*, 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009. 208 pages. $58.80. ISBN 978-0-13615778-6.**

Richard Wingell's *Writing about Music* is accessible but slightly more formal than Bellman's *Guide*, and much friendlier than Herbert's work. Wingell is clear and direct on why we write about music and the difficulties of doing so; he too abhors the anthropomorphized instruments and overly grandiose prose of poor writers. The book divides roughly into two sections, the first on the basics of researching and writing a research paper and the second on more specific issues: format; writing talks, program notes, criticism, and written exams; style; and common writing errors. The first two chapters delve into the differences between description and analysis, emphasizing the value of musical analysis and what to keep in mind in writing about it. Wingell includes examples of the kind of research that can be done on works from Gesualdo and Bach through Stockhausen, offering students models for their own writing. He outlines just what research in music means in Chapter 3, defines plagiarism clearly and in down-to-earth terms, and gives students an inverted triangle-method of finding materials: start broadly, at the encyclopedia and library-catalogue level, and work down to more specialized writings. He makes an excellent case for using materials in non-English languages and even notes that information found in tables and bibliographies are the same in any language. Chapter 4 on writing a research paper is thoroughly up-to-date, including a section on editing electronic documents, saving draft versions, and how to proofread after running a spell-check.

The second half of *Writing about Music* helps students understand voice and audience for different kinds of writing ranging from seminar presentations to essay tests and writing for non-specialist audiences. All of the advice is solid and practical, and Wingell makes careful mention of dealing with limits on these kinds of writing—the length of the piece, or how much time a student has to write it. In Chapter 6 he addresses potential problem areas in writing for non-academic audiences, including providing audience-friendly material about early music, transcriptions and arrangements, new music, overly familiar repertoire, and text and translations, offering suggestions for what kind of information will likely interest the audience. The following chapter takes on style, discussing different kinds of prose, tone, and the stance of the writer. Wingell provides guidance for using slang and foreign terms, and gently instructs students not to create new words, turn nouns into verbs and vice versa, or misuse superlatives.

The final chapter of *Writing about Music* is devoted to correct usage. Wingell includes positive and negative examples for grammatical problems like run-on sentences and mixed metaphors, teaches students the general rules of pluralizing and possessives, and enlightens them on the proper use of *whose*

and *who's*, *fewer* and *less*, and similar pairs. Several pages also cover punctuation, and a final section includes ways in which students should use technical terms and describe musical events with accuracy and vivacity, but not hyperbole. The writing sample at the end is a good example: it could have used more editing by the student author, but it is an acceptable undergraduate paper that could be used as part of an in-class exercise in editing.

**James R. Cowdery, ed. *How to Write About Music: The RILM Manual of Style*, 2nd ed. New York: Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale, 2006. 128 pages. $16.95.**
**ISBN 978-1-932765-03-8.**

All three of these books on writing about music have some content that covers the tricky things: when to italicize, or how to transliterate Russian composers' names, for example. But the very best book for that kind of information is *How to Write About Music*, edited by James R. Cowdery and published by RILM. Whatever book you ultimately assign for your students about writing a paper, this one should accompany it. There's no text here on using libraries or selecting a topic for a paper—just lists and information on everything from indexing to choosing an easily-found title. This guide is where students learn how to use *gay* instead of *homosexual*; that avant-garde has a hyphen but isn't italicized; that it's Brahms's, not Brahms' or the "terribly wrong" Brahm's. It's the place to go to find out how to indicate page numbers, what parts of ships' names to italicize, how to alphabetize surnames with *Van* or *Las*, what the city that used to be called Calcutta is called these days (and how to spell it), what an "organ C" translates to in the Helmholtz or ASA systems, how to cite everything from books to technical drawings of instruments, and why big long sentences like this should be broken up into smaller, more manageable ones. It covers every tiny detail anyone will ever want to know about words for, on, and about music, and it is an essential reference for everyone, from the newest student to the most experienced scholar.