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The Assignment Sequence for Music 111-2

Nicholas Mathew

Apart from class assignments, the contents of the table below represents all of the required take-home written work for Music 111-2 – “Beethoven and Today’s Music” – in chronological order [compare with course schedule for an overview of the units, reading, etc.]. It seemed reasonable to submit these assignments together since I conceived of them as a single sequence. I should add that it was ultimately the short assignments that absorbed the greater part of my energy and attention – even though I designed them to complement the longer essays.

TABLE 1.

Assignment Sequence and Groupings

Course Units

Essay 1: Diagnostic.	Unit 1: “The All-Time Greatest.”
Short Assignment: Presenting the Facts (1). Short Assignment: Presenting the Facts (2). Essay 2.	
Short Assignment: Explaining Yourself (1). Short Assignment: Explaining Yourself (2). Essay 3.	
Short Assignment: Other People’s Arguments (1). Short Assignment: Other People’s Arguments (2). Essay 4.	Unit 2: “Pushing the Envelope.”
Short Assignment: Polemics (1). Short Assignment: Polemics (2). Essay 5.	Unit 3: “Keeping It Real.”
Short Assignment: Picking Your Register (1). Short Assignment: Picking Your Register (2). Essay 6.	
Short Assignment: Subtleties (1). Short Assignment: Subtleties (2). Essay 7.	Unit 4: “It’s a Guy Thing.”

The basic idea was simple enough. Essays 2-7 were each accompanied by a pair of short assignments – “short” meaning around three paragraphs long – with four principal functions: (1) to address one important issue or skill in writing, (2) to encourage a closer and more critical engagement with the reading material, (3) to draw attention to the ways in which the reading material offers models for good writing, and (4) to introduce concepts or approaches relevant to the main essay.

Almost as important as these functions, however, was the effect the short assignments had on the day-to-day working of the course. First, they guaranteed a perpetual trickle of “low-stakes” writing over the semester – and, in turn, an atmosphere of “constant writing” (and constant thinking about writing) in which students rarely separated their engagement with concepts, acquisition of knowledge, or formulation of opinions from their ability to write. (To be sure, one corollary of this “constant writing” was “constant grading” – but the assignments were so brief that I ultimately found that I could respond to an entire batch of assignments in about an hour.) Second, the short assignments were for the most part straightforward and varied enough to cater for a range of abilities: students who struggled with longer essays found that they could tackle a short assignment with confidence of some success, while those who found the longer essays less of a challenge tended to use the short assignments to experiment with their writing. Third, the short assignments gave the students a way of regularly assessing and recognizing their progress throughout the semester.

As far as this “progress” is concerned, I had originally intended the complete sequence to describe a trajectory from “simple,” novice writing to more sophisticated, “advanced” writing. A little more teaching experience, however, soon taught me to be doubtful of such a linear, goal-oriented conception of learning. It was nevertheless important to me that the students should get the

satisfaction of feeling their work become progressively more “advanced”; the assignments thus progress superficially from “simple/easy” to “complex/challenging.” Probably more important, however, is the parallel progression from prescriptive and concrete assignments to more suggestive, fluid ones. After all, the distinction between “novice” writers and “advanced” writers at freshman level, it seems to me, is sometimes as much a question of self-confidence and autonomy as what we consider “technique.” The assignment sequence thus acknowledged that “advanced” writers will be able to take more responsibility for what they write and how they write it.

For more specific remarks about the sequence please refer to the table below as you look through it. I should add that, given time, I would have liked to have developed the essay assignments as much as the short assignments. A project for the future perhaps. At any rate, I’d certainly recommend series of short assignments to other writing teachers – especially those who can cope with the minor stress of a new batch of papers occupying their desk for a whole semester. Thanks ever so much for two really enjoyable and challenging semesters working for the Knight Institute!

TABLE 2.

Assignment	Comments
Essay 1	A diagnostic assignment intended to get students to address the <u>reasons</u> behind their preferences rather than simply to air them. A degree of reflection, however small, on the origins of our musical predilections seemed a fitting entry into the course, which began by introducing the idea of the canon and Beethoven’s central position in it. The final part of the assignment was intended to emphasize the idea of writerly choice – and the concomitant notion that we needn’t include every single thing we think of.
Presenting the Facts (1-2)	Intended to address a number of vital skills early on. (1) Reading: how and what to read to find things out. (2) Critical reading: students were encouraged to distinguish between different kinds of sources and the different kinds of knowledge to

	<p>be gathered from them – to be neither credulous nor glibly skeptical. (3) How to put together simple sentences conveying information. (4) How and when to cite sources. (5) Techniques for introducing source material into one's own text.</p> <p>These assignments also prepared the class for the study of images in essay 2 insofar as they introduced the concept of "construction"; I hoped that it would become evident that descriptions of musicians and their lives that might seem relatively transparent to a freshman are in fact artful constructions.</p>
Essay 2	More complex than essay 1 in that it asked students to respond to specific images but draw general inferences from them.
Explaining Yourself (1-2)	Practice at taking an essential idea away from a piece of writing (which might be not be easy to read) and writing about it with clarity and vividness. Both assignments were intended to show that getting an idea straight often requires a good deal of re-thinking, re-writing, and re-organizing. Hence the diagrams. The assignments also ensured that the concepts vital to essay 3 were well-prepared.
Essay 3	More complex still than essay 2 in that it asked students to respond to a specific movie, album, etc., and to draw general inferences from it – <u>but also</u> to connect these inferences to the critical concepts that we had studied (Bloom's "anxiety of influence" or theories of the canon). Many students wrote papers that not only used these critical concepts efficiently and insightfully, but also revised or modified them in response to the specific object of study.
Other People's Arguments (1-2)	Intended to encourage students to identify the stages and methods of an argument as well as to articulate the similarities and differences between viewpoints. Sparked discussion of key ideas in unit 2, such as "progress." In a rather simple way, the second of these assignments also addressed how arguments might be subjected to a critique.
Essay 4	A return to the old "Blah. Discuss" essay question form that I was raised on! It seemed the next logical step – since it asked students to draw general inferences from specific examples, connect them to general concepts (e.g. "Progress"), and to subject the speakers to critique.
Polemics (1-2)	The idea of critique introduced in the previous three assignments briefly took over. Designed to encourage students to argue strongly and clearly. Also, in the second of these assignments, to show that it is perfectly OK – indeed, desirable – to make readers laugh if you can. It was excellent fun reading these.

Essay 5	The first essay in which the students were allowed more or less free rein. I simply provided suggestive titles.
Picking Your Register (1-2)	Intended to encourage students to think about register and how it can help an argument to sound more persuasive. Introduced the idea that each student should be aware of – and seek to clarify – his or her voice.
Essay 6	Even freer – just a few prompts. I expected the students to discover something worth writing about themselves.
Subtleties (1-2)	My aim here was to empower the students a little at the end of the semester: to have them articulate what they valued in their own writing – and to help them recognize that they are indeed capable of real “subtleties.” The second of the two assignments continued the theme of “voice” introduced by the previous short assignments. I added the “aphorisms” part mostly because I thought it was fun – but also, since we were talking about “subtleties,” I suppose I wanted to suggest that it is OK to be “literary” in this way as long as you know what you’re doing: it’s not just the preserve of Men of Letters.
Essay 7	Once again: just a few prompts.

Essay 1

UNIT 1: "The All-Time Greatest."

2-3 pages is plenty (double-spaced, 12-point font). As with all assignments, don't forget to give your paper a title, number your pages, and staple them together. Thanks.

As we discussed, this is a course about a musician who is supposed to be the greatest there ever was – a musician who still provides the standard for what “greatness” is. Part of the point of this course is to give us some idea of how it ended up like this – and what the long-term consequences have been for the way we think about music. So our first piece of writing is about greatness in music. You've probably all got ideas about who the “All-Time Greatest” is – but I want you to imagine what someone else's list would look like.

Pick one or two pieces of music or musicians that you think that many people – but not you – would place in their list of the “All-Time Greatest.” What types of people tend to like this kind of music? Why do they like it – and why do you not agree with them? If you were to criticize their choices, how would they defend them? Where did they get their musical values from? – Where did you get yours, for that matter?

Here are a few questions you might want to touch on as you go: Do you make a distinction between music that you merely like and music that is truly great? To put it another way – do you recognize the greatness of particular artists or pieces of music even though you don't really like them? Why do you think our culture obsessively lists the All-Time Greatest in the media and the academy? (Who are the people who compile the lists anyway? Do they have ulterior motives or do we just need some way of making sense of it all?) Does the idea of the “All-Time Greatest” have any negative or positive consequences for the way we think or act?

In many of your essay assignments, each question will seem to consist of a number of related parts – just like the string of questions above. It is important to remember that you won't necessarily be able to answer all of them – and I certainly don't expect you to. It is definitely a bad idea to compose an essay simply by tackling each part of the question in turn: the result would either be a boring list or unreadable chaos. My questions are only intended to get you thinking; your essay should have a logic and direction of its own. This frequently means that you will emphasize one part of the question at the expense of another – fine. Look at the question, then choose what you want to write about.

After you've written the essay, in just a sentence or two, describe something which you could have included in your paper, but which you decided to leave out.

Short Assignment: Presenting the Facts (1).

Almost every essay includes a section in which we present facts. The reason is sometimes straightforward: we cannot assume that our readers know a great deal about our topic and we need to tell them one or two things if they are to follow our train of thought. Just as often, however, facts are the necessary corollary of arguments: it's no good getting into a debate unless you can actually support what you are saying.

Even though facts and our construction of them are often inseparable in practice, it is nevertheless extremely important for the clarity of our thought and our writing that we bear in mind the distinction between FACTS and VALUES. So here's a couple of definitions to start with: a FACT is a piece of information whose truth or falsehood that we could in principle prove or disprove: "Although by all outward appearances Nick is male, he is actually female." An examination by an experienced medical team would quickly show whether this statement is correct (it isn't, by the way). By contrast, VALUES are by definition not provable – they are opinions, assumptions, interpretations, constructions, moral judgments, and so on. FACTS can be called upon to support certain VALUES, but we cannot show through any kind of evidence that VALUES themselves are right or wrong. VALUES do not address the world "as it is," but rather to the world as we construe it, would like it to be, or think it ought to be. So – FACT: "Nick picks his nose during class." VALUE: "Nick is colossally annoying." Distinguishing between facts and values is often more difficult than it would appear – but it is worth keeping the distinction in mind when reading and writing.

As we discussed, Shaw's essay ("Beethoven's Centenary") constantly conflates fact and value – not good form for academic prose, although it makes for enjoyable journalism. At any rate, Shaw's image of Beethoven is immensely vivid as a result.

- (1) Create two columns – one for FACTS and one for VALUES – and enter five examples of each drawn from Shaw's essay. For example:

FACTS:

Beethoven died aged 57.

VALUES:

Beethoven "died as he had lived, challenging God and defying the universe."

- (2) Now write a paragraph that incorporates all of your facts. Make sure that it doesn't degenerate into a list: for example, write sentences that creatively incorporate more than one fact at a time.

- (3) Briefly (one paragraph) discuss a value in Shaw's essay that is nevertheless presented like a fact OR discuss a passage in which facts and values cannot be distinguished.

Short Assignment: Presenting the Facts (2).

Solomon's "Portrait of a Young Composer" is much stricter than Shaw's essay when it comes to separating facts and values. Solomon assembles all kinds of sources in order to speculate – sometimes quite adventurously – about Beethoven's appearance, his social life, and his political beliefs. But this is an academic biography rather than a journalistic piece: Solomon is careful to distinguish between what his sources say and how he interprets them. Some readings of the facts seem self-evident, others merely plausible, while yet others seem far-fetched at best. He accordingly signals how arguable his view is with particular words and phrases: "perhaps" or "maybe," for example, and formulations such as "it can fairly be said that...." (But remember Orwell's warnings about these useful but potentially clumsy constructions!)

It is worth knowing that Solomon is a trained and practicing psychoanalyst as well as a musicologist – and he likes nothing better than to get Beethoven onto the couch! But he is smart enough to realize that whenever he talks about Beethoven's psychology – in other words, Beethoven's innermost feelings and motivations – he can only be speculating: the readers should be warned – and this accounts for the constant reappearance of "perhaps" and "maybe" (see p. 108, for example). Yet there is something else a bit more cunning going on here. After all, these words do not merely warn us that we are reading speculations; they also allow Solomon to slip in the kinds of suggestions that the rest of us might not get away with. "Perhaps... Maybe": Solomon is constantly cajoling us, nudging us, encouraging us to accept his version of events. You can "fairly say" X; "maybe" Y is true; "one might even add" Z. Even though these words seem to warn us of a shaky conjecture to come, what really matters is that Solomon has managed to get an un-provable idea into our heads with impunity – rather like writing something down and crossing it out, but in such a way that one can still read it through the scribble!

Also worth noticing is the elegant way in which Solomon deals with a mass of evidence from contemporary letters, diaries, and reviews. Sometimes he simply places a quotation in front of us with an appropriate preamble that provides context:

Frau Bernhard vividly remembered a study in contrasts at the Lichnowsky residence: "Haydn and Salieri sat on the sofa on one side of the little music room, both most carefully dressed in the old-fashioned style with bagwig, shoes, and silk stockings, while Beethoven used to appear even here in the freer, ultra-Rhenish garb, almost carelessly dressed." (Solomon, 106).

Sometimes he runs a relevant quotation into a sentence:

One report recalled his “studied rudeness” and thought this suggested that he was “acting a part.” (Solomon, 106).

At other times, he indents the text as I have done above and gives us the whole “undigested” source (see p. 109: “typifying the tone of these relationships....”).

Write three paragraphs describing Beethoven’s personality (based on Solomon, Shaw, and Comini). Using Solomon as your model, incorporate as many methods of citation and quotation as possible. Please use footnotes as we discussed.

Essay 2

UNIT 1: "The All-Time Greatest."

Essay: 3-4 pages.

Choose one of the following topics:

- (1) Discuss and compare two images of Beethoven from Comini's book. How do they "construct" Beethoven? What does their construction tell us about the era that produced them? Is there anything about the images that reflects "stock" or even clichéd messages about how a great musician is supposed to look and behave?
- (2) Take two record or CD covers of your choice – covers that depict the musicians who play on them – and compare how each one "constructs" its subjects. What are we supposed to think of the musicians and why? What techniques does the cover art use to convey subtle (or not-so-subtle) messages about its subject? What, if anything, does the cover tell us about the era (e.g. nowadays, the seventies, etc.) that produced it?
- (3) Compare any image of a present-day musician with any nineteenth-century (that's from the 1800s!) image of Beethoven from Comini's book. How much has the representation of musicians and artists changed in the intervening centuries, and why? Do your images also suggest that there are continuities in how we have expected musicians and artists to look and behave over the past two centuries?

Short Assignment: Explaining Yourself (1)

After having read this week's selections from Nicholas Cook, write an explanation in two or three paragraphs of what writers like Lydia Goehr mean by the "imaginary museum" of musical works.

Explaining abstract concepts is something we all have to do – if only to make sure that we understand an idea ourselves. More importantly, however, we use abstract ideas to help us discuss something in particular – and this is when we really ought to explain what we mean to our readers before we go any further. Trimble has some excellent advice about how to explain abstract ideas – see point 7 of his "26 Tips" (p. 76). Note particularly his recommendation that "the more abstract your argument, the more you should lace it with what I call 'word pictures' – illustrations, analogies, vivid quotations, metaphors, similes."

But wait! Don't just jump right in there. First, take a piece of plain paper and draw me a spontaneous flow chart or spider diagram. Write down as many different ideas as you can think of that make up the concept of the "imaginary museum," and connect them with arrows where appropriate. If you can think of examples or images that help to explain the concept, add those to your diagram too.

Hand in your diagrams along with your paragraphs. Before you hand it in, though, write a sentence or two explaining how you got from your diagram to your finished explanation.

Short Assignment: Explaining Yourself (2)

Explain in two or three paragraphs what Harold Bloom means by “the anxiety of influence.” Explain his ideas about influence and explain in your own words how each kind of influence that he describes is supposed to work. Who, according to Bloom, is “anxious” and why?

Bloom’s theories about influence are complicated – or, at least, he makes them sound pretty complicated. Not only does he categorize what he considers to be all the different kinds of influence, but he gives them difficult Latin and Greek names, which can be confusing. Certainly, he doesn’t explain himself with the lightness and clarity of Nicholas Cook. This isn’t to say that he is a bad writer (in fact, I think he writes beautifully) – it’s just that Bloom doesn’t intend to explain himself as transparently as Cook (who, after all, is writing a book called Music: A Very Short Introduction). Still, it means that the task for Bloom’s explications (yes, that’s us) is somewhat harder. We have to hack our way through his poetic language, his Latin and Greek nomenclature, and his sometimes roundabout methods of explanation to get to the point. What, at bottom, does he mean? To be sure, we’ve probably all got some idea of what we mean when we talk about “influence.” But Bloom clearly means something extra; he wants to say that there are specific kinds of influence, which work in specific ways.

It’s tricky, I know. So, before you start, make another one of those flow charts or spider diagrams. Your final draft should have a more distant relationship with Bloom than your explanation of the “imaginary museum” did with Cook. After all, Cook already explains his concept straightforwardly enough; by contrast, when you explain Bloom, you will almost become “translators”: you’ll take his terminology, ideas, and metaphors and “translate” them into clearer, more succinct writing. Your chart or diagram should begin this process of “translation”: what words, examples, analogies, or imagery can you use to explain each of Bloom’s categories?

Essay 3

UNIT 1: "The All-Time Greatest."

Essay: 4-5 pp.

Either design your own question based on this week's reading, listening, and viewing, or tackle one of the following tasks:

Bill and Ted's Imaginary Museum:

- (1) With reference to the concept of the "imaginary museum," discuss how the movie Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure satirizes the way we are taught to think of history and historical figures. How does the idea of the "imaginary museum" help us to understand what the movie is sending up? Is Bill and Ted ultimately a critique or an endorsement of the "imaginary museum"? (Remember: it could equally be both or neither.) What role does the film give to music? Does music ultimately transcend its historical setting, or is it bound to it?

Harold Bloom's Influence:

- (2) With reference to Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence," discuss the musical relationships between the Beatles' Rubber Soul and the Beach Boys' Pet Sounds. How do Bloom's ideas help us to understand the connection between the two albums? Which one of Bloom's categories seems most appropriate to describe the influence of the Beatles on the Beach Boys and why? (Remember: you might choose different ones for different songs.) In your opinion, is there anything about the connection between these albums that Bloom's theories are unable to account for? How would you alter or expand Bloom's categories accordingly?
- (3) Tackle the previous question, but select two different albums or musical compositions of your choice. (Please e-mail me what you have decided to discuss before you start writing.)

Short Assignment: Other People's Arguments (1).

Slonimsky ("The Non-Acceptance of the Unfamiliar") and Newman ("A Musical Critic's Holiday") both present clear and forceful opinions. Summarize their arguments, dedicating a paragraph to each writer. In a third paragraph, explain what you consider the connection between the two arguments to be. Do they disagree or agree with each other? Why?

Longer essays almost always contain portions of summary. We usually want to refer to a writer or thinker whose views are relevant to our discussion, or whose theories bolster our argument. It might help to think of summarizing as a kind of map-drawing. We have a detailed road atlas that shows us how to drive from Ithaca to New York City. We want to show a friend how to get there – so we draw a sketchier map for them on the back of an envelope. It is on a much smaller scale and contains not nearly as much detail as our road atlas, because they do not need as much. We indicate only where they are heading, the important turns they have to make on the way (route 79 onto 81, and so forth), and the main landmarks that they'll pass so that they'll know they're on the right track (Binghamton, Scranton, and so on). Likewise, when summarizing Newman's essay, we want to recount his main thesis (where he's heading), what the principal points are that get him there (the important turns in his argument), and one or two key pieces of evidence that support his claim (the landmarks along the way). In order to encapsulate the whole argument we don't need to go over everything that Newman has written – that would be like trying to reproduce the road atlas on the back of the envelope.

But be careful....

This week's readings present their opinions in markedly different ways, and this has an effect on how you approach your summaries. Slonimsky marshals an avalanche of quotations to back up his central claim. He presents his thesis quite early on and doesn't develop it a great deal – instead, he continually circles back to his main point so that it doesn't get lost among all the supporting evidence. Perhaps he intends us to become more and more convinced as his essay progresses: after all, the sheer quantity of evidence – and, of course, how funny most of it is – is a form of persuasion. "Look at all these dumb critics!" Slonimsky seems to be saying, "Surely you don't want to end up like one of these guys!?" At any rate, don't be put off by all of his examples; you have to explain what all of these examples amount to – what argument or assumption they support.

By contrast, Newman argues more methodically, point by point, introducing supporting evidence only when necessary. He guides the reader

through his argument with some care: "If you accept this, then you must also accept this; given this, it is safe to assume that," and so forth. Newman also tries to deal with potential objections on the part of his readers as he goes along. Sometimes he does this by introducing the objection himself ("but surely, one might object, it would be equally possible to say....") only in order to dismiss it ("which sounds convincing, but if that were true then...."). At other moments he includes dissenting voices in the text itself – as quotations (or imagined quotations) from his critical colleagues ("I have often heard otherwise intelligent people say: 'All great composers were misunderstood in their own lifetime'").

So, to use a military metaphor, Newman's essay is like a precisely-planned invasion: he carefully plots his course and attacks along a clear trajectory, trying to pre-empt any retaliation as he goes. Slonimsky's technique is more similar to the "shock and awe" tactics that we heard so much about recently: he just bombards us with evidence until we have to surrender.

Short Assignment: Other People's Arguments (2)

We ought to know by now where Slonimsky and Newman stand – both on their own and in relation to each other.

But are they justified?

Every argument has its weaker and more compelling points: where the logic seems watertight or a bit leaky; where an example seems appropriate or completely out of place; where the author (like Shaw, remember?) seems to be relying more on rhetoric or bombast than reason; or where a writer (also like Shaw) appeals to hidden biases, our emotions, or our sense of humor to convince us.

I'd like you to go hunting for a few of the "weak points" in Newman's "A Musical Critic's Holiday" and Slonimsky's "Prelude." Dedicating a paragraph to each writer, discuss two "weak points" in each argument. What makes each point weak? Is it a lapse in logic, a poor example, an inconsistency, or what? In your opinion, might the argument still be saved, or do these points make the whole house of cards collapse?

Essay 4

UNIT 2: "Pushing the Envelope."

Essay: 4-5 pp.

Discuss one of the following quotations. Be sure to clarify what stance or opinion you think that the quotation represents, and to unpack each of the terms or ideas that the writer or speaker uses – whether explicitly or implicitly. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Two Progressive Composers:

- (1) "Schoenberg is a musical dead end – a depressing symbol of our self-conscious, sick world. Nobody likes this hideous music – just as nobody likes electricity pylons or factory chimneys belching out smoke: the stench and muck of the twentieth century. Yet, in the name of 'progress,' we are forced to accept it." (Hans Pfitzner, 1921.)
- (2) "Schoenberg is simply a good old-fashioned case of a composer being 'ahead of his time.' While I find him awfully impressive, I can't say I care for his music much myself – but then, I am of my own time, and quite happily so. Not to worry. You can be sure that the world will catch up eventually." (Arthur Bliss, 1915.)
- (3) "Beethoven pointed the way when all around him were blind. We are still following his exalted path. He was the first of the Moderns." (Richard Wagner, 1870.)
- (4) "Even as the centuries pass, Beethoven will remain eternally at the vanguard – untamable, challenging, unsettling; forever the sound of modern Man striving to the limits of imagination and possibility." (Ernst Bloch, 1925.)

A Progressive Musical Style:

- (5) "'Progressive rock' is an oxymoron." (Norman Mailer, 1972.)
- (6) "Who wants to be 'progressive,' anyways? I hear that stuff – those guitar solos going on and on and on, those 'dreamy' sound effects, those 'deep' lyrics – and to be honest it makes me want to go lie down. What happened to ROCK?" (attrib. Joey Ramone, 1981.)

Progress in Music:

- (7) "Why should the idea of 'progress' apply to music anyway? – It's an art form, not a bloody cell-phone." (attrib. Thom Yorke, 2001.)
- (8) "How to be successful in 'pop': think inside the box, never leave your comfort zone, stay as far away from the cutting edge as possible, and whenever someone pushes the envelope – push it back again. Break any of these rules and it's just not good old 'pop' any longer – it's that tedious crap that students listen to." (attrib. Neil Tennant, 1989.)

Short Assignment: Polemics (1)

So, we've discussed in class many times what makes an essay worth writing and worth reading. One prerequisite for producing worthwhile writing that keeps coming up is this: we have to have a point worth defending or a thesis that is at least disputable or not obvious.

As writers, we are most often compelled to write because we have something to say that seems important enough to share – a viewpoint that we hope others will consider. Conversely, as readers, we often want to read in order to find out someone else's views – and often, the more strident and rhetorically high-pitched the writing, the more we enjoy it (even if we disagree). Why else is the media full of those "opinion column" writers and "commentators" telling us what they think day in and day out?

A great many of the enjoyable, ferocious arguments that we read are specifically directed against something. A common word for an argument of this kind – whose aim is to dismantle another perspective, cultural phenomenon, or social system – is a "polemic": Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto was a polemic directed against capitalism, for example.

Joan Smith's piece about Eminem is explicitly polemical: she takes on "male heterosexual rap culture" in no uncertain terms. (And her main points circle around the fraught ethical question of "authenticity" that we have been discussing in this unit.) She uses all kinds of clever techniques to overcome her opponent. Here are just a few of them you might want to think about as you re-read her article – I've given them silly titles (I would think that we all use these without knowing it when we're talking with our friends every day):

- (1) The Terminological Query. I say that Kid Rock is fantastic because he is so "real." You say that you're not sure what "real" could possibly mean in this context.
- (2) The Basic Assumption Query. I say yet again that Kid Rock is fantastic because he is so "real." You ask me why being "real" should be such a good thing.
- (3) The Classic Counterexample. You say that Eminem is homophobic – just look at his lyrics. I ask how you account for his performance with Elton John at the Grammy awards.
- (4) The Killer Analogy. I say that the perfect musical form would be unconstrained by rules or strictures. You ask me to consider what a football game would look like with no official rules or strictures.
- (5) The Reductio ad absurdum. It's Latin – meaning, more or less, "reduction to absurdity." You argue that composing music with a computer is not

creative, because the machine produces pre-existing sounds for you. I reply that a piano is also a machine that produces pre-existing sounds for you – so, according to your view, composing at the piano is also not creative.

- (6) The Deflation. (Remember how Orwell did this?) You say: "In the absence of any objective rules for the assessment of musical compositions, their essential worth is an entirely subjective phenomenon, reflecting only the predilections and associations of the listener." I say: "So really you're making the trivial and obvious point that when someone likes or dislikes a piece of music it is a matter of opinion."
- (7) The Logic Special. Does X really follow from Y? I say that flossing nightly prevents heart disease, since statistics show that people who floss are less likely to die of a heart attack. You point out that people who take care of their general well-being are more likely to floss – so it is doubtful that there is any direct link between flossing and heart disease.
- (8) Sniffing Out Prejudice. You say that women have no aptitude for the electric guitar: this isn't a bias – how many bands can you name with a female lead guitarist? I point out that (1) women in our society are less likely to be encouraged to play the guitar by sexist parents and teachers; (2) the design of guitars is often awkward for women, with their smaller hands and larger chests; (3) in our sexist society, we are less accepting of women guitarists than women singers or dancers; (4) the lack of women guitarists creates a vicious circle in which aspiring female guitarists have fewer role models; (5) there are actually lots of bands with female lead guitarists – they just don't necessarily produce the mainstream musical nonsense upon which you evidently base all of your biased judgments!

Write three paragraphs of polemic against any opinion that you've encountered in the course so far OR one of the following views:

Eminem is this generation's truly great poet.

Rock and roll is the authentic voice of America.

Any musician who aims to be popular is selling out.

Beethoven never soiled his universal music with the filth of politics.

Short Assignment: Polemics (2)

Like Joan Smith's article, Bel Littlejohn's piece on Eminem is also a polemic of sorts, but she is using a very different technique to convince us of her opinion – humor. Her piece is an example of satire: it uses ridicule and mockery to show us how absurd her opponents are. It's hardly particularly subtle, but it is highly effective.

Littlejohn's image of Eminem sitting having tea with a group of old English poets before reciting some of his "verse" is pretty funny – and makes us question anyone who would defend him by claiming that he is a "great poet." And all of those invented rap musicians – like "Monstrous Fat Buttox" – give us an amusing perspective on those over-the-top stage personas that we almost take for granted nowadays. These satirical methods are extremely common if you think about it: the first example places the object of satire in an alien context, so that it looks ridiculous (imagine that you saw the rock band Kiss sitting in a box at the opera – it's just funny). The second example exaggerates to the point of absurdity (a great conductor wouldn't be called "Herbert von Karajan," but "Hinkelberger von Dingledanglesdorf").

Write three paragraphs ridiculing a musician or a band of your choice (it could even be Beethoven) – and the kinds of people who like them. Take no prisoners. But be clever. It's no good "satirizing" something if you just sound bitter or ill-tempered ("X is just stupid, Y is dumb, etc."). And it's also no good just openly playing to existing prejudices – that makes you sound like a narrow-minded little bigot ("I mean, who'd bother to listen to a bunch of stinky hippies," for example). At the end of reading it, I want to feel that the reputation of the object of your ridicule is in tatters....

Essay 5

UNIT 3: "Keeping It Real."

4-5 pp. Either design your own essay based on this unit's readings and viewings or write a piece with one of the titles listed below (or an essay inspired by the title). Make sure that your essay contains extended discussion of at least one piece of music (and the music – not just the lyrics) and – if relevant – this unit's movie.

- (1) The Idea of Authenticity in Music, c.1770-c.2004.
- (2) Beethoven's Guilty Secrets.
- (3) Beethoven: The Father of Musical Authenticity.
- (4) The Characteristic Sound of "Selling Out."
- (5) What's Wrong With "Selling Out" Anyway?!
- (6) When Can a White Guy Become a Rap Star?
- (7) Rap Authenticity in Eminem's 8-Mile.
- (8) Authenticities on Lauryn Hill's The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.
- (9) "Acoustic" Authenticity from Bob Dylan to "Unplugged."
- (10) Finding the "folk" in "folk music."

Short Assignment: Picking Your Register (1).

Irwin Silber's "open letter" to Bob Dylan belongs to a long tradition, which even includes St Paul's letters in the bible. The form of the "open letter" is, of course, a rhetorical device – a literary "trick" – in which a viewpoint that the author wishes to communicate to as many readers as possible disguises itself as a personal plea. In Silber's case, the form of the "open letter" gives his writing the appearance of intimacy and sincerity even as he argues a more general point about the fate of folk music.

It hardly needs saying, therefore, that an "open" letter is somewhat different from a "private" letter: writing one is rather like talking to somebody when you mean to be overheard (like those dreadful people who make "witty" and "intelligent" remarks to their friends when there are professors about...). The writer's choice of register is the principal difference between a private and an open letter. As we discussed in class, register simply means the tone you pick for speaking or writing: you'll want different registers depending on whether you're writing a thank-you note to your grandmother, applying for a job, or begging your bank manager to extend your overdraft – and most of the time, of course, you'll pick the appropriate register as if by instinct.

Silber's use of register is worth noticing. He wants to create the illusion that we're eavesdropping on a private exchange – but if you pay close attention, you can see that his prose keeps taking side-long glances at us, to make sure that we're listening. One moment, Silber is communicating to Dylan casually and personally, the next, he has taken up a much more formal and sophisticated tone, most often when he wants to make one of the general points that (presumably) motivated him to publish the letter in the first place. Indeed, the form of the open letter invites an author to play with registers like this, because he or she must perform the trick of writing at once personally and broadly, intimately and formally – a trick that allows a writer to appeal to a single person and yet anyone who might be reading.

- (1) Go through Silber's letter, sentence by sentence, and mark whenever the register seems to change from "personal" to "formal." Make a simple diagram showing the letter's changes of register, citing the sentence in which the change occurs.
- (2) Write one paragraph explaining the difference between the two registers and providing examples. Consider things such as vocabulary, turns of phrase, sentence length, and the use of "contractions" (e.g. "you're" instead of "you are").
- (3) Write one further paragraph explaining the connection, as you see it, between Silber's changes of register and the structure of his letter. When

does he become formal or personal, and why? Does he express any key points in a personal tone?

[Don't forget that Trimble has lots of interesting things to say about register in his chapter on "readability"; it might be worth skimming through that chapter again, just to remind yourself of what he recommends.]

Short Assignment: Picking Your Register (2)

Music has registers, just like prose. The aura of “folk authenticity” that we talked about in connection with Bob Dylan is all about musical register – Dylan’s use of acoustic rather than electric instruments, for example, or his bluesy vocal style. Very different in tone from Beethoven’s Third Symphony.

Of course, Dylan’s lyrics help to create the flavor of “folk authenticity” too – and not just because of what he tends to sing about. His choice of individual words and images, the colloquialisms and idioms that he uses, the accent he sings in – all these things reinforce his folksy musical register.

Remember the value that Trimble (Writing With Style, p. 77) places on relaxed prose that sounds sincere? Well, it’s yet another example of the “ethic of authenticity.” And like all of the musical “authenticities” we’re discussing in this unit, the appearance of sincerity in writing requires great awareness and not a little artifice. Once again, we have to pick our register carefully. Like Silber’s “personal” tone in his open letter, a well-executed, “intimate” appeal to a reader in the middle of a more impersonal argument makes all the difference (wouldn’t you agree?).

Write two or three paragraphs about the lyrics to “Maggie’s Farm.” How would you characterize the register of Dylan’s lyrics? What kind of image is he trying to project? What words, phrases, imagery, and grammatical idioms does he use to reinforce it? Do you think that Dylan’s register remains consistent for the whole song, or does his mask occasionally slip? If you think that the mask does slip, what is it concealing?

Here’s something to think about, if you don’t know where to start. Remember how Bob Spitz described Dylan’s paradoxical musical identity? Let me remind you: “Dylan was a Country Boy from Greenwich Village; a wise-assed hick; a hobo with a college education – the one and only folk beatnik.” Is there something both hokey and street-smart about “Maggie’s Farm”? Something simultaneously naïve and folksy as well as sophisticated and knowing?

Essay 6

UNIT 3: "Keeping It Real."

4-5 pp. Either design your own essay based on this unit's readings or write on one of the following themes (but provide your own title):

- (1) Write about a kind of music (e.g. Jazz or Indian classical music) in which the Western categories of "performer" and "composer" are questionable or meaningless; explain why this is so, and what effect this has on the style, design, and aesthetic of the music in question.
- (2) Discuss the "ethics" of the singer-songwriter. You might want to explore the "ethical" reasons for our cultural preference for singer-songwriters over groups like the Spice Girls.
- (3) Discuss how the different musical roles of "performer" and "composer" relate to the power games played by the protagonists of the film Deception (1946). You might examine what these power games tell us about the ways in which our culture implicitly regards the roles of "performer" and "composer."
- (4) Look again at Nicholas Cook's interesting exploration of the related terms "author," "authority," "authorize," and "authoritarianism" (Music, p. 25). Relate the ideas in his discussion to the film Deception.

Short Assignment: Subtleties (1)

In a way, this isn't really an assignment at all – it's an exhortation. Think about how you write! We're getting pretty advanced at writing by now – and the advanced stuff is in many ways the most personal stuff. I can't tell you how you like to write.

As advanced writers, you should be aware of your favorite little techniques and approaches: ways of putting sentences together, methods of arguing, favored registers and turns of phrase, different methods of beginning and ending a piece of writing, and so forth.

You might think of all of your subtleties as a toolbox: as an expert (or at least competent) crafts-person, you should be able to reach for whichever tool seems appropriate for the job at hand. To be sure, you're going to be better at using some tools than others – you might be excellent at using colorful and imagistic language, for example, but less good at expressing tersely what you want to argue. Still, the most important thing is to know which tool is appropriate for which job – and, of course, to be aware of which tool you're using. Badly assembled prose is sometimes like a shelf that someone has put together using a hammer whenever they should have used a screwdriver.

Now, once again, I can't tell you what your subtleties are; you're going to have to figure them out for yourself – based on what you like to read as well as what feels effective when you write it.

These questions are just to get you thinking; you might also glance back at what Trimble has had to say in connection with some of these issues (in his chapters on "openers" and "closers," for example).

- (1) Think of three different ways to begin an essay (and I am not, of course, referring to the dreaded "opening paragraph") and make up your own examples for each. What is the effect of each type of beginning? What kind of essay does each beginning seem best suited for?
- (2) Repeat the exercise above, only this time with conclusions.
- (3) Discuss three things that you have found that you like to do in your writing and explain why. They could be anything from the choice of certain words to the ordering of an entire essay.

Short Assignment: Subtleties (2)

Here are two more exercises – once again, just to get you thinking. The first is an interesting “limbering up” exercise for writers – and it relates to the questions of “voice” and “register” that we have discussed quite a bit in class. The second relates to a more specific literary technique that you might find inspiring.

(1) Limbering Up

Write two or three sentences in response to the question “why are there so few great female composers?” in the manner of

- (a) an old, wise, English literary gentleman.
- (b) a sports coach.
- (c) the assistant junior manager of a boring office.
- (d) a Cornell freshman who thinks he or she is smart.
- (e) a French philosopher (it doesn’t have to be in French!).
- (f) Yourself

This is a hard follow-up question, for which you don’t necessarily have to provide a written answer: what do you think characterizes your voice?

(2) Aphorisms

Aphorisms are short, pithy remarks that sum up an idea snappily. They can often be amusing – or, at least, they can make you smile because they are thought-provoking or vivid.

Aphorisms don’t do the job of arguing for you – they simply make your viewpoint more digestible, memorable, persuasive, and ultimately more comprehensible. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was fantastic at writing aphorisms, described them as like “raisins in cake”: raisins, he remarked, are the best part of cake, but that doesn’t mean that we’d rather eat a bag of raisins!

Aphorisms work particularly well as the beginnings and endings of paragraphs: at the beginning, they offer up an idea in a terse, suggestive, perhaps enigmatic form, which the rest of the paragraph goes on to explain at greater length; at the end, they provide a nice summation when the reader has already got the drift.

Here is a super example from the start of Germaine Greer’s piece on “Manmade Women”: “Women are illusionists.” What can she mean!? Well, she

immediately goes on to clarify, with a much longer sentence – an amusing (and alarming) list:

They fake light-heartedness, girlishness and orgasm; they also fake the roses in their cheeks, the thickness, color and curliness of their hair, the tininess of their waists, the longness of their legs and the size and shape of their breasts.

We see something similar at the start of the fourth paragraph: “Nowadays none of the varieties of natural is good enough.”

Later, Greer uses an aphoristic tone to wrap up her argument wittily at the end of a paragraph (p. 37): “Tit-power does not add up to much, all said and done.” On its own, this remark seems hardly anything at all. As a withering, and vaguely crude, summation of what has just gone before, however, it is enormously effective (go back to the paragraph and see for yourself).

And, finally, here is a more serious example from Greer’s essay on “Girlpower” (p. 325):

Minx magazine advertises itself as for “girls with plenty of balls,” but what this means is simply that girls who read it will be encouraged to take liberties rather than fight for them.

Ouch. Watch out for Greer’s use of aphorisms – she is a real expert at this kind of writing, and it partly explains why her prose is so enjoyable to read.

- (1) Find five aphorisms from any of this week’s or last week’s readings (the pair of essays by Julie Burchill might not be such a bad place to start looking).
- (2) In one paragraph, discuss two of them – what makes them so effective at communicating their message?
- (3) Go through your essay draft and think up an aphorism for the beginning of three of your paragraphs.
- (4) Come up with aphoristic conclusions for a further three paragraphs (they can be the same ones if you want).
- (5) Make sure that at least one of your aphorisms is good enough to stay in your final draft!

Essay 7

UNIT 4: "It's a Guy Thing."

4-5 pp. Either design your own essay based on this unit's readings or tackle one of the following:

- (1) Talk about the relationship between gender roles, performance, and authorship in the film The Red Shoes (1951) OR the film Deception (1946) OR both.
- (2) Write an essay that discusses and illustrates the idea that western societies tend to see authors as male and performers as female. (You might want to suggest ways to complicate this view a bit.)
- (3) Compare how Beethoven and any other musician of your choice (it could be anyone from Iron Maiden to David Bowie to Wagner) construct models of masculinity through their music.
- (4) What is "girl power"? Did it fail? How does the story of "girl-power" in music reflect the fate of "girl-power" in general?
- (5) Why are there so few female lead guitarists compared to female lead singers? (There isn't one answer to this question – there are obviously lots of them. You might enumerate and discuss what you think are the most important ones – and the reasons could be at once cultural, social, political, economic, musical, biological, practical, etc.).

MUS 111-2 (Freshman Writing Seminar)
Beethoven and Today's Music
Cornell University, Spring 2004
Instructor: Nick Mathew
Syllabus

UNIT 1: "The All-Time Greatest."

Week 1 (Jan 27-29) Beethoven Hero.

Reading:

- George Bernard Shaw, "Beethoven's Centenary."
- George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language." [Handout.]
- Maynard Solomon, Beethoven, chapter 8 ("Portrait of a Young Composer").

Recommended Listening:

- Beatles, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts' Club Band.
- Beethoven, Third Symphony (first movement).

Week 2 (Feb 3-5) Heroes, Myths, and Images.

Reading:

- Alessandra Comini, The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking, chapter 1 ("Mythmaking as Cultural History").
- Carl Dahlhaus, Nineteenth-Century Music, pp. 75-80 ("Beethoven: Myth and Reception"). [Handout.]

Looking:

- Comini, The Changing Image of Beethoven.

Recommended Listening:

- Beethoven, Fifth Symphony.

Week 3 (Feb 10-12) The Museum, the Syllabus, and the Record Store.

Reading:

- Nicholas Cook, Music: A Very Short Introduction, chapters 1, 2, and 4 ("Musical Values," "Back to Beethoven," and "An Imaginary Object").

Viewing:

- Movie: Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure (1989).

Week 4 (Feb 17-19) Influence.

Reading:

- Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, introduction ("A Meditation on Priority and a Synopsis").
- Eduard Hanslick, "Brahms's Symphony No. 1."

Recommended Listening:

- Beethoven, Ninth Symphony (finale).
- The Beach Boys, Pet Sounds.
- The Beatles, Rubber Soul.
- Brahms, First Symphony (finale).

UNIT 2: "Pushing the Envelope."

Week 5 (Feb 24-26) The Idea of the "Modern."

Reading:

- Cook, Music, chapter 3 ("A State of Crisis?").
- Ernest Newman, "The Schoenberg Case." [Handout.]
- _____, A Music Critic's Holiday, chapter 1.
- Nicolas Slonimsky, A Lexicon of Musical Invective, excerpts [Handout], and prelude ("The Non-Acceptance of the Unfamiliar").

Recommended Listening:

- Beethoven, Große Fuge, op. 133.
- Haydn, String Quartet, Op. 20, No. 2 (finale).
- Rossini, overture to Guillaume Tell.
- Schoenberg, Pierrot lunaire.
- Hugo Wolf, "Ein Ständlein wohl vor Tag."
- Kurt Weill, "Surabaya Johnny."

Week 6 (March 2-4) "Progressive" Rock.

Reading:

- Newspaper report, "Radiohead: BBC Has Exiled Adult Music."
- Newspaper report, "Bono Declares War on Bubblegum Pop." [Handout.]

Recommended Listening:

- Beatles, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts' Club Band.
- Pink Floyd, Dark Side of the Moon.

- Radiohead, Kid A.

UNIT 3: "Keeping It Real."

Week 7 (March 9-11) What "Authenticity" Means To Us.

Reading:

- Nicholas Cook, Music, re-read pp. 7-14.
- Aldous Huxley, "Sincerity in Art." [Handout.]
- Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity, chapter 3 ("The Sources of Authenticity"). [Handout.]

Viewing:

- Series Episode: Tenacious D, "The Search for Inspirado."

Week 8 (March 16-18) Selling Out.

Reading:

- Martin Cooper, "Composers and the Influence of Politics."
- Maynard Solomon, Beethoven, chapter 17 ("The Dissolution of the Heroic Style").

Recommended Listening:

- Beethoven, Wellington's Victory.

Week 9 – SPRING BREAK

Week 10 (March 30-April 1) Race, Class, and Rap Authenticity.

Reading:

- Newspaper Report, "You Think I Give a Damn About a Grammy?"
- Kid Rock, "Lay It On Me" (lyrics). [Handout.]
- Bel Littlejohn, "Right On Da Streetz."
- Joan Smith, "Outpourings of Rage from Eminem."

Recommended Listening:

- Eminem, The Marshall Mathers LP.
- Lauryn Hill, The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.

Viewing:

- Movie: 8-Mile (2002).

Week 11 (April 6-8) Folk Authenticity and the Singer-Songwriter.

Reading:

- Irwin Silber, "An Open Letter to Bob Dylan."
- Bob Spitz, Bob Dylan: A Biography, chapter 7 ("Getting Wired").

Recommended Listening:

- Bob Dylan, Highway 61 Revisited.
- _____, "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A'Changin'."

Week 12 (April 13-15) Performance and Authenticity.

Reading:

- Julie Burchill, "The Rise and Rise of Little Voice."
- Cook, Music, re-read pp. 9-12 and p. 25.
- Aldous Huxley, "The Interpreter and the Creator." [Handout.]

Recommended Listening:

- Backstreet Boys, Millennium.
- Beatles, The Early Beatles.

Viewing:

- Movie: Deception (1946).

UNIT 4: "It's a Guy Thing."

Week 13 (April 20-22) Performance, Authenticity, and Gender.

Reading:

- Newspaper report, "No More Girl Power."
- Julie Burchill, "Music to the Ears."
- Germaine Greer, The Whole Woman, excerpts ("Manmade Women," and "Girl Power").

Recommended Listening:

- The Spice Girls, Spice.

Viewing:

- Movie: The Red Shoes (1951).

Week 14 (April 27-29) Macho Beethoven.

Reading:

- Nicholas Cook, Music, chapter 7 ("Music and Gender").

Recommended Listening:

- Beethoven, Fifth Symphony.

Week 15 (May 4-6) Beethoven's Pelvic Thrusting.

Reading:

- Susan McClary, Feminine Endings, excerpts. [Handout.]
- _____, Queering the Pitch, excerpts. [Handout.]

Recommended Listening:

- Beethoven, Ninth Symphony (first movement).
- Schubert, "Unfinished" Symphony (first movement).