

## TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT MUSIC

Adapted from Thomas Kelly's "A Guide to Writing about Music." Please note key terms in bold.

You don't have to be an expert in music to write a good paper about it. You certainly don't have to be able to read music. You just have to be able to listen closely, analyze the music, and arrive at a view, an opinion, an interpretation of the music's meaning. So in many respects, strong essays about music are like the best essays about anything. They have a plausible and interesting main argument, a coherent structure, convincing evidence, and an elegant style. The best papers about music also include precise attention to musical detail rather than exclusive attention to lyrics. This means discussing the **instrumentation** or **digital composition** of the music; shifts in dynamics such as **volume** or **speed**; the structure of **lyrical verse** and repeated **choruses**; shifts in **key** or **rhythm**; and other musical elements. If you choose to analyze music videos, you may also discuss visual elements. Attention to musical and visual detail allows a reader to "locate" a moment in the music without reference to a score (an essay about literature could simply cite a page number); then the analysis translates the feeling created by the musical details into the terms of **mood** and **message**. In this manner, students can grasp the kinds of "arguments" or feelings that musicians work to compose.

Pay attention to your first impressions. There are a number of questions you could ask yourself at this stage, so focus on what strikes you most about the music or a section of the music. When you notice yourself responding a certain way, what is happening in the music that seems to cause that reaction? Here are some examples of areas you might pay special attention to: Are there sudden increases or decreases in **volume** (dynamics)? Does a tune seem to switch from one **instrument** to another, or from one group to another? How does the music seem to be **structured** — are there several different sections? Can you count along with the music? Are certain notes or passages **repeated** over and over again, as in a **chorus**? Does something interesting happen when a particular word is sung? By listening repeatedly and focusing on a different attribute with each hearing, you can build a catalog of the various (and at first listen, mysterious) elements of a musical work or excerpt.

As you are making concrete observations about the music, you can begin to organize them meaningfully. If the **melody** changes from one instrument to another, if it gets louder or softer at a certain point, if something interesting happens when a particular word is sung, what does that mean for how we understand the work? How do aspects of the piece's form, or **repetitions** and **variations** of sections, contribute to the work's meaning or function?