

**MUSI 112 Listening to Music**  
**Professor Craig Wright**

**Attending a Concert & Writing a Music Review**

[This was written for a concert in Battell, but most of the points apply to Woolsey Hall as well.]

Please write a 500 word review of \_\_\_\_\_ . You have received a prep sheet for this talking about the musical repertoire. Your review, again, should be no longer than 500 words—distill your thoughts into that space (that's what real reviewers often have to do).

As to the concert itself: dress as you wish (casual, dressy, 1980s, whatever). Sit where you wish. Best place to hear is likely the center balcony. Best place to see is likely the balcony all the way up front on the right side.

**TEN POINTS TO GUIDE YOUR CRITICAL LISTENING**

1. How is the orchestra disposed? Are brasses at the back? Winds in the middle? But where has the conductor put the second violins, violas, and cellos? In Battell the woodwinds and brasses usually sit on an elevated platform at the back. This makes the sound of the brasses tend to rise up above that of the strings and blare forth too loudly. Are the brasses too loud generally in this concert?
2. Does the conductor keep the volume of the rest of the orchestra down, so that softer solo winds (oboe, flute, & clarinet) can project through the texture?
3. It is easy for a non-professional orchestra to play loud and fast. More difficult is to play soft and slow, which tends to expose the individual parts, revealing any shortcomings of the performers. Thus pay particular attention during the most quiet moments.
4. Non-professional orchestras have difficulty attaining extremes of volume. Is the conductor able to get them to shift quickly and convincingly between very loud and very soft?
5. The French horn is a potentially raucous instrument. Do the French horns blend with the rest of the orchestra or do they stand out in an unpleasant way? This will be especially an issue in the Beethoven.
6. Are the players watching the conductor or do they have their noses in the music? If the latter, likely they don't know it very well? (Also, are bows of violins all going up and down at same time—they should be; if not, the phrasing of the music may be out of sync)?

7. Conversely, does the conductor seem to know the score (is he even using a score; some conductor's memorize all the lines of the entire piece)? Does he use a score for all four pieces? Does he have his nose in the score (not a good sign) or is he continually looking at the players to lead & throw cues?

8. Does the conductor choose fast tempos and a light sound or slow tempos and a richer orchestral sound? To get a basis of comparison, you might want to listen to buy the \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ on iTunes for 99 cents each. (See prep sheet.)

9. Tuning: do the winds in particular sound "in tune." If the conductor ever has to tune between movements, likely the *preceding* movement was *not* in tune.

10. Does the orchestra & conductor give a convincing performance? Does the audience seem engaged the entire time (or does it look bored and do you yourself find yourself day-dreaming)?

Finally, read the CONCERT PREP SHEET *before* you go to the concert. Get in your mind ahead of time the types of things you should listen for, as indicated on the sheet.

### **THINGS *NOT* TO WRITE ABOUT**

1. Clothing, hairdo, shoes etc. of the performers.

2. The form, structure, and intrinsic worth of the pieces that are performed (only at premiers of *new* compositions does the worth of the new piece get discussed). There are no new pieces on this concert so you're not concerned about whether the composition is "good or bad," only whether the performance is good or bad.

3. The life of the composer or the history of the pieces (such info is usually given in program notes).

### **THE NATURE OF THE REVIEW**

1. A music review, as that of an established play, is essentially a review of the performance, not the work. Were the pieces well performed? If so, how so? If not, why not? Sample reviews, both good and bad, will be handed out in section.

2. A music review should begin with an opening paragraph that tells "where, when, who, and what." In a succinct and possibly clever way tell the reader where and when the concert was, who performed it, and what they performed.

3. You don't have to develop equal time (review space) to all pieces. You may be able to generalize about one or two of the pieces in a couple of sentences for each and then move onto the most "arresting" performances of the concert. For example, by beginning "the disappointing work in terms of performance was \_\_\_\_\_" or the "the most exciting performance was to be found in the orchestra's rendition of \_\_\_\_\_." Then describe

at length what was disappointing or appealing in the performance of the piece on which you choose to concentrate.

4. Show us that you have learned something in this course. Use the vocabulary that we have been developing through the "terms" of the course. Don't say, for example, that the "instruments moved the melody around" but rather (which instruments) "the violins convincingly effected a modulation of the theme through different keys" (which keys doesn't matter; you'd have to have perfect pitch to know that and only 1 person in 10,000 has perfect pitch). Please don't call an overture or a set of instrumental variations a "song"; again: piece, composition, work, *oeuvre*, overture, etc. (anything but a "song"). All the pieces on this concert are instrumental works; none has lyrics; ergo, none is a song (*pace* iStore)

5. Vary your prose. Don't begin each sentence with "The piece this... The piece that..." (And moreover, we are not so much discussing the piece as the performance of the piece—for the word piece, substitute frequently, composition, work, movement, or even, where appropriate, symphony, overture, etc.)