

SOME BASIC SUGGESTIONS FOR DOING WELL ON THE LISTENING ASSIGNMENTS (Feel free to augment this, of course)

1. Listening is *active* hearing:

Do not simply have the assignment on as “background” music and hope that you will learn the pieces merely by osmosis.

2. Know what you are listening to:

Make sure that you consciously pay attention to the cue sheet when you are listening (i.e., pay attention to *what it is* that you are listening to!). Many students in the past have forgotten to do this only to find themselves saying during the quiz, “Ooooh, I *know* this one! I wish I knew the name of it or who it was by!”

3. If a score is available, use it!

4. Pay attention to *obvious* elements of music. Some of these are:

- *The forces* used in the piece (the instrumentation)
It is silly to confuse, say, a piece for clarinet and piano with one for orchestra
- *Tempi*
It is silly to confuse a very fast piece with a very slow one. It is silly to miss when a slow piece *becomes* fast or vice versa
- *Dynamics*
Pay attention to loud and soft and everything in between
- *Meter*
Pieces in 3 sound different than pieces in 4 . . . or 2 . . . or 5 . . .
- *Registral variations*
Give yourself markers:
“oh yeah, this is the high part . . . here’s that low bit . . .”
- *Timbre and articulation*
Muted staccato trumpets sound different than bowed cymbals or pizzicato celli
- *Rhythm, motivic rhythm, and basic subdivisions*
Give yourself markers:
“oh yeah, here’s where that dotted-eighth-and-sixteenth thing comes back . . .”
“it was just bopping along in eighths, now we have these triplets . . .”
- *Form*
Notice big things:
“hmm, that sounds familiar . . . maybe it’s a recapitulation”

5. If there's text, become familiar with it:

The use of text in a composition provides composers with an entire new area to explore in the composition. Serious composers never treat the text “willy-nilly;” they will always seize it as an opportunity to provide the listener with an idea of what their interpretation is of the text (or, perhaps, what element(s) of the text they wish to bring out).

There are many tools at composers' disposal to emphasize text. These include – but are by no means limited to – repeating or omitting text and text painting. Text painting is the process in which a composer brings out something in the text by representing that thing in the musical setting. This can be done in both obvious and subtle ways.

For example, the text painting in the finale to Act I of Sullivan's “Yeomen of the Guard” is very obvious: when the guards (who go to the jail to fetch Fairfax and find that he has escaped) sing “We hunted high, we hunted low,” Sullivan sets the first text *forte*, in a high register, and the second text *piano*, in a low register.

Another example, much more subtle, may be found in the *Fecit potentiam* movement of the Vivaldi Magnificat. In this movement, Vivaldi has the choir disperse into individual lines on the words “dispersit superbos” (“scattered the proud”) instead of singing homophonically, as they were until that point.

6. Become interested; think of yourself as a scholar:

You might like every piece on every listening assignment. There might be pieces that you do not care for. If you do not like *any* of the works, you might give serious, sober thought into whether music is an appropriate major for you (as a serious musician, you will be expected to be familiar with a good deal of the material on the assignments).

Let your imagination become a part of your listening technique. Does the music seem to suggest things to you? Does it remind you of anything? How does it make you *feel*? You can use these to help you identify pieces; you can also use them as starting points for much more fruitful (and satisfying) musical investigation and experience as your skills begin to develop and grow.

Let your sense of curiosity become a part of your listening technique. Learn about the composer (*especially* if you like the composition). Was s/he successful in their time? Was the composer well-known? What kind of person was the composer? Did they do other things besides compose? Did they know (or were they friends with) any famous people? What was their nationality? What kind of things were going on in the world when they were composing? Did world or local events affect their compositional choices in any way? (For example, during the World Wars a significant number of chamber works for unusual combinations of instruments were written, often because that was what was available from a commissioning group: the other members were off fighting in the war).

Read a little about the composition (*especially* if you like it). Why was the work written? Was it written for someone in particular? How was the work received at first? Was it an “easy” composition, or did it take an eon to get “just right?” Was it originally written in the form on the assignment or was it used in other ways? (For example, Hindemith's work “Mathis der Maler” (Matthias the Painter) is an opera and a suite in the guise of a symphony).

Let what you learn spur you on to other listening. If you keep reading, for example, about another composer being important in the life of the one you are listening to, take the opportunity to learn about that composer and listen to some of their music.

7. For a musician, listening is never a “chore” and is not limited; it’s a *fun opportunity*:

Listening is *fun*. However, like virtually everything else in life, it is only as fun as you allow it to be. Professional musicians are often in awe that they get paid to do what they do; don’t tell our bosses, but we’d do this for free. It’s like a five-year-old having a job being a professional ice-cream taster.

At this stage in your life, your motto should be “I’ll listen to anything, at least once.” And I *mean* anything. Don’t feel that your listening is limited to any style, period, instrument, genre, performer, or anything else. Listen to classical (which, as music majors in a serious art program, should be near-and-dear to your heart), jazz, rock, punk, grunge, emo, Tibetan monks, Javanese gamelan orchestras, Bulgarian women’s choirs . . . everything. Listen to orchestras, pianists, flautists, tubists, drummers, marimbists, string quartets, piano duos, brass quintets . . . everything. Listen to operas, symphonies, ballets, suites, character pieces, lieder, solo works . . . everything.

Become excited when someone mentions to you a “cool tune you’ve got to hear.”

Try to listen to at least one piece you don’t know every day. If you do this, you will have heard more than 600 new works in your college career at least once!

CASE STUDY

Let's look at an example of how the above pointers can be put into practice. Suppose on your listening assignment you are given Mahler's "Die himmlische Leben" [The Heavenly Life] from his Fourth Symphony.

I'll start by noting some basic things not specific to *identifying* the piece (#6 and #7 above).

Gustav Mahler was a Bohemian born on July 6, 1860 (exactly four months before Lincoln was elected to his first term) and died, at the premature age of fifty, on May 19, 1911 (William Howard Taft was president; World War I was to begin in three years).

He was the most famous conductor of his time. Even his enemies (and he had lots) thought he was a genius conductor.

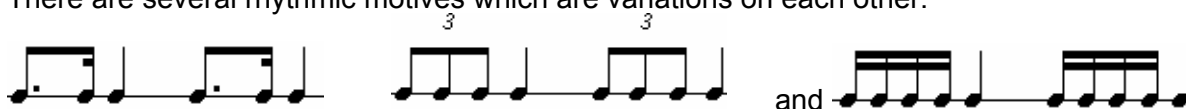
His most famous stint was as conductor of the Vienna Opera (1897–1907), a period *still* referred to as the "Golden Age" of the Vienna Opera. He also conducted at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and conducted what is now known as the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He was known for his keen expressionism, his dictatorial style (common in conductors of that time), and his perfectionism.

He married the "prettiest girl in Vienna," Alma Schindler, in 1902. She was the daughter of the late Emil Schindler, one of the great landscape artists, and the step-daughter of Carl Moll, another important artist. Principally through Alma, Gustav Mahler met some of the most important, prominent and highly-regarded artists, philosophers, writers, etc. in the world; he also met some people who were destined to become famous. Among the people who personally knew Mahler during the course of his life, one can count: the musicians G. Adler, A. Berg, J. Brahms, A. Bruckner, C. Clemens, Hans von Bülow, F. Busoni, J. B. Foerster, O. Gabrilowitsch, O. Klemperer, S. Kurz, Lilli Lehmann, A. v. Mildenburg, Angelo Neumann, A. Nikisch, S. Rachmaninoff, A. Schönberg, L. Slezak, J. Sibelius, Ethel Smyth, S. Stojowski, R. Strauss, P. Tchaikovsky, Bruno Walter, A. Webern, E. Wellesz, H. Wolf, and A. Zemlinsky (former teacher and beau of Alma); the artists C. Moll, G. Klimt, A. Roller, E. Schiele, and A. Rodin (famous for works like "The Thinker," he also did two busts of Mahler); others, such as Count Apponyi, Hermann Bahr, Sigmund Freud, H. v. Hoffmannsthal, Richard Horn, Fritz Löhr, Romain Rolland, Emil Zuckerkandl, and Stefan Zweig. This list doesn't even scratch the surface.

Now that we know some trivia about Mahler, we might become interested in pursuing information on some of the things that come up in reading about him. For example, how did he know Freud? (He was one of Freud's most famous cases, even though they only met for a single day! Ah, the plot thickens. . . .) What about this Zemlinsky guy? He was a composer, too. I've never even heard of him until now; maybe I should listen to something by him.

For the current purpose, let's move on to the work at hand. I will only note a couple of things (to give you the idea of the types of things you can try with your listening. This is *not* an exhaustive list by any stretch of the imagination).

- This work is the last movement of the Fourth Symphony (written 1892; rev. 1899-1900; rev.1910).
- The Fourth Symphony is almost classical in proportions when compared to Mahler's other symphonic output.
- The movement is set for orchestra and soprano solo.
The orchestra is large, but small by Mahlerian standards:
4 flutes (+2 piccolos), 3 oboes (+1 English Horn), 3 Clarinets (+E^b clarinet and bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (+ contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, timpani, sleigh-bells, cymbals, glockenspiel, triangle, tam-tam, bass drum, harp, violins I and II, violas, cellos, and basses.
- This movement was originally supposed to be the seventh (!) and final movement of the Third Symphony, a work of gigantic proportions which lasts over an hour and a half and uses huge forces.
- There is thematic material in the work which is shared with the fifth movement of the Third Symphony.
- The text comes from "Des Knaben Wunderhorn," [The Youth's Magic Horn] a text which Mahler returned to over and over again in his compositional life. Indeed, *Die himmlische Leben* predates the symphonic setting.
- The text tells the story of the delights encountered in Heaven. The singer is instructed to sing "mit kindlich heiterem Ausdruck; durchaus ohne Parodie!" [with childlike and serene expression; absolutely without parody!].
- The work begins quite calmly, with a lilting, but *Sehr behaglich* [very comfortable] tempo. The conductor is admonished that the singer is to be *äusserst discret begleitet* [extremely discreetly accompanied].
- This relative calm keeps being interrupted with increasingly violent outbursts. Each time these come, they have much the same music, and always with the sleigh-bells which were first heard in the first movement. (Indeed, the music is a reworking of the first-movement material).
- These outbursts are always preceded by a reverential, chorale-like setting of the words, and it is almost always at this point that a "heavenly figure" is mentioned.
- Among the Saints in the text one may count Peter (looking on), Luke (slaughtering an ox), Martha (the cook), Ursula (laughing) and, to end: "Cäcilia mit ihren Verwandten sind treffliche Hofmusikanten! Die englischen Stimmen ermuntern die Sinnen, dass Alles für Freuden erwacht." [Cecilia and her relatives are excellent court musicians! The angel voices enliven the senses, so that everyone awakes for joy.]"
- Though the orchestra is big, the texture is almost always light in this movement. It's rare to get a full *tutti* here.
- There are several rhythmic motives which are variations on each other:



- These rhythmic motives may be found not only in the thematic material, but also in various, recurrent accompaniment figures.
- Keeping with the calm, joyous nature of the text, the harmonic rhythm of the piece is generally quite slow. There are few drastic chromatic motions.
- However, the movement is an example of a so-called “progressive harmonic” scheme. Like each movement of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, this movement begins in one key (G Major) and ends in another, higher, key (E Major); in this instance, there is programmatic reasoning for it.