

Video 3: Writing about Music Part 2

Link to the video: nmcrec.co.uk/education/exhibition-project/video-3

Finding Words for Music









Hello again.

In this video we're going to find some words for music. It can feel a bit tricky and 'forced' at the start but don't worry – it gets easier as you go along.

Lets start with some music – we're going to listen to a very short extract from Elizabeth Maconchy's *Third String Quartet*. You probably don't know this piece of music – and that's just fine. As we listen, I want you to write down some words or phrases that pop into your head. Try and find words connected to the way the music makes you feel. Maybe an image or scene or a pattern comes into your head – if so, great! Write it down. Try not to simply describe what you hear such as 'the violin plays a high melody'; or 'the cello is quiet'; but let the music conjure up ideas and pictures in your head.

See if you can write around 10 words or phrases as we listen – you might want to listen to the extract more than once. Don't feel self-conscious – just write it all down. I call this 'splurging' – it's a sort of emotional brain-dump.

What words did you write? Here are mine:

-  **Fairy story** and **folk tales** – It took me into a magical realm of old stories
-  **Eerie** – it makes me think of music of the night
-  **Misty** – perhaps it's a landscape where things are not quite what they seem
-  **Foreboding** – something bad might happen
-  **Magical** and **mysterious** – it's shadowy and dark
-  **Creeping**
-  **Sliding**
-  **Slithering** – the sounds of the strings... perhaps I'm also thinking of the movement of the players' hands to create these sounds...



This is a mood board of words; it's a collection of suggestions and unfinished ideas.

Sometimes I write down a word that is not quite right, but I like the 'feel' of it as I say it.

Slithering is great word for the music we have heard – **sinewy** would be another one. Try saying them – they sort of slide around your mouth, exactly like the sound of this music in your ears.

If you found that exercise hard, try and imagine you are hearing music coming from the television in another room – what sort of images do you think might be on the screen that you can't see?

This little exercise we have just done is designed to get you 'in the zone.' It stops you thinking about music purely in terms of the 'building blocks' we are often taught – the melody, the harmony, the texture, the rhythm – and reminds us to connect with music on a creative and emotional level. To captivate a reader, you do need to inject a little wonder and curiosity into your writing.

And by the way – just because you hear it one way and someone else hears it another way, does not make either opinion invalid. It may be that the composer didn't have any of your ideas in mind when she wrote the piece, but this is also OK because the whole point of music is that it can create different emotions in everyone, and they can even be different every time you hear it! So make sure you include some of your own creative thoughts in your writing.

From Words to Sentences

Here are a few things I have written in the past which started with just a few key words to get me into the 'zone'... and then I fleshed these ideas out into sentences:

"The movements form a series of dreams, brutal nightmares and awakenings where half-sleepy fragments and memories jostle with violent, distorted music machines..."

"...pauses that bridge the shadowy gap between sound and silence, clinging to the edge of what can be heard..."

"...the achingly slow ending of Mahler 9, which Bernstein describes as... just spider web strands – barely holding onto life..."

"...this work for two violins which wanders though a hazy, dream-like landscape, interrupted by unpredictable biting snippets..."

"Where Elgar, Holst and Delius drew inspiration from the surface of the land, Max and Harry seemed to burrow beneath it, their music emerging from tiny organic seeds that grew, expanded and contracted like living things..."



Remember: Your emotional response to music is valid and important and interesting to people.

Now, it's time to do some research

This is the more conventional bit, but it's really important. Your readers will want to know things to make sense of it all.

They may be thinking

- 🧐 Who wrote this?
- 🧐 Why does it sound this way?
- 🧐 How did the composer create it?
- 🧐 And many more questions...

The combination of well-researched facts and your own imagination is a very powerful one and will help keep your readers reading and wanting to listen to the music.

Where can you find information about composers and their music?

- 🧐 **NMC album notes and website:** For NMC composers, look at the album notes. These include really well written composer biographies and information about the pieces often written by the composer. The NMC website also has lots of information.
- 🧐 **Composer websites:** Composer websites are a brilliant source of information, including other pieces the composer has written, so you can explore the wider context of their work.
- 🧐 **Publisher websites:** Publisher websites are often handy, if the composer has a publisher.
- 🧐 **Press:** You can look at online newspapers and magazines for interviews and reviews.
- 🧐 **Social media:** You can look at the composer's social media if they use it – you may find good links to articles or features.
- 🧐 **YouTube:** Try YouTube for filmed interviews.
- 🧐 **BBC Radio 3:** Their website is often good for interviews, profiles; perhaps the composer has been a guest on a recent radio programme.



It's important to look at lots of sources to make sure the information is accurate and reliable, but also so that you start to build up a true picture of the composer and their music – not just the opinion of one or two people.

OK – so you've got your imagination and your research. In the final video, I'm going to show you how to pull it all together and I'll tell you my Ten Top Tips.

See you soon!

