



Video 4: Writing about Music Part 3

Link to the video: nmcrec.co.uk/education/exhibition-project/video-4

Hello again everyone.

So,

-  You've done your creative 'splurge'
-  You've gathered factual information from a variety of sources

Now – tell the story, combining facts with your own ideas and creativity. Aim to draw the reader in to the world you want them to discover.




Some Examples

Here are some examples of things that I have written. They all combine factual information with my own creative thinking about the music in question.

This is a short extract from an article I wrote about the world premiere of *The Protecting Veil*, by John Tavener, performed at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms in 1989:

“Luminous waves of sound filled the Royal Albert Hall, like light squeezed out of a distant past... the ethereal cello of Stephen Isserlis drifted between serenity and fervour in this 45-minute meditation. The press called it ‘radiant’ and commercial recordings flew off the shelves.”

It's only 45 words, but it contains:

-  information about the piece (who played it, how long it is, where it was)
-  some idea of the sound world that the audience experienced (that's my 'creative' bit)
-  a suggestion of the importance and significance of this work – the press loved it and (unusually for classical music) the recording sold thousands of copies.



Here's another one. This is part of a programme note for *Cantabile for Strings* by Pēteris Vasks:

“Pēteris Vasks wrote the single movement Cantabile for Strings in 1979 as he completed his composition studies at the Latvian Music Academy. Using ‘simply the white notes of the piano’, it begins in unison but rising motifs soon weave a dense polyphonic tissue of sounds, iridescent and glittering like the chiming of a thousand church bells or the clamour of a nation’s voices. Sometimes they become chords and sometimes they become sweeping melodies emerging from the landscape.”

See that I started with a factual sentence, but very quickly slipped into creative writing which gives the reader some idea of the extraordinary sound world of this composer.

This one is also quite ‘technical’ – I mention ‘white notes of the piano’, unison, rising motifs, polyphony... admittedly, not everyone might know what all these terms mean in music, BUT the creative descriptions are there to help in case of any doubt (a tissue of sounds... iridescent and glittering... the chiming of a thousand church bells, etc.)

And finally, this is from an article on the 1969 Queen Elizabeth Hall world premiere of *Eight Songs for a Mad King* by Peter Maxwell Davies:

*“The stage of the Queen Elizabeth Hall was set with several large gilded bird cages. In each, a musician was ready to give the world premiere of **Eight Songs For A Mad King** by Peter Maxwell Davies. An incessant, brittle, ticking clock began, slipping into creeping, sliding strings... then a strangulated, barely-human cry. The music plunged quickly into the tortured mind of King George III, a mind full of ‘snakes and dancing, locks and slithering’...*

Eight Songs was written for the Pierrot Players who gave that first performance. It was inspired by a miniature 18th-century mechanical organ that played eight Scottish tunes. There was a note explaining that the organ had been ‘for King George III for birds to sing’. In the throes of mental illness, King George had tried to teach finches to sing the tunes.”

The first part is pretty much all a creative response. But I bring in the facts quickly in the second paragraph which keeps it balanced and reassuring for readers. It's also a terrific true story about a tiny mechanical organ and the singing finches: we are firmly in a theatrical, fantastical world here!

I hope this is helping to give you an idea. I'd really like to encourage you to tell stories. Include facts, include history, include quotes but don't be afraid to use your imagination.



Here, to end, are my ten top tips for this project:

- 1. Take your time.** Be prepared to take some time over this – it can take a while to get it right. Keep editing, cutting things down, reading it again and again. I often start with many, many pages of notes which I whittle down to just a few words. I play with the words, I rearrange things, I sleep on it... Accept that writing – like all creative things – is a messy, chaotic, time-consuming process.
- 2. Keep on listening.** If the words aren't flowing, put the music back on. Writing about music is the only time I actually listen to music whilst working. If I feel stuck, I listen and it seems to kickstart my imagination and writing again...
- 3. Be concise.** It's OK to splurge and initially write lots, but then be brutal and cut it down so that it's really succinct and to the point. Don't get side-tracked into long-winded stories. If you are writing about a piece of music, do that. Write about the music. Keep it focussed.
- 4. Always keep your readers in mind.** What might interest them? What would they like to know? Imagine your reader as a real person (perhaps a friend or family member) – what would they be asking you?
- 5. Keep it simple.** Use familiar language that everyone will understand. The best writing is instantly readable and makes you want to keep on reading. Try reading your work out loud to yourself – it's a very good way to check if anything sounds a bit pretentious or over-complex. If you enjoy saying it, others will enjoy reading it too.
- 6. Remain curious.** Be amazed by composers, how they do what they do, and the way their music makes us feel. If you are fascinated, your readers will be.
- 7. Research, research, research.** Knowledge and preparation are key to a good piece of writing.
- 8. Create a little world.** I always think of my writing as a little piece of theatre... what sort of sound world am I trying to draw the reader into? How can the words and language we use help the reader to step inside your world?
- 9. Think of the sounds of words.** A word like 'smooth' takes a long time to say (try it!) – is it a good word for the music you are trying to describe? The word 'brittle' is brisk, harsh and rattles in your mouth – is this the right word for the sound you are hearing?
- 10. Have fun!** There are no rules. And if you make rules, you can break your rules! Take chances, don't be too 'safe', don't be afraid of getting it 'wrong' – the more free you feel to write as you want to, the more you will enjoy it... and readers will enjoy it too!

