

Harvard University
Literature and Arts B-51
FIRST NIGHTS

Fall 2006

Monday and Wednesday (and one Friday), 10:00 a.m.

Sanders Theater

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A study of five famous pieces of music, both as timeless works of art and as moments of cultural history. Close attention is given to techniques of musical listening, and to the details of the first performance of each work, with a consideration of the problems involved in assembling such a picture. Works studied are Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*; Handel, *Messiah*; Beethoven, Symphony no. 9; Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique*; Stravinsky, *Le sacre du printemps*. A sixth piece, commissioned especially for First Nights, concludes the course. No previous knowledge of musical notation is required.

Required texts: A textbook, entitled *First Nights* (Yale University Press, 2000) is required. The book has been written with this course in mind, and the appropriate readings from it will be obvious as the course proceeds. In addition to narrative material it contains a selection of readings related to the first performances of these pieces. These readings are original source materials, in many cases translated into English, from which the reader will form her/his own view of the situation of the first performance. Please read the materials for each piece before coming to the related lectures.

In addition, there are two sourcebooks. These contain the complete musical scores for the five historical pieces studied in the course, and also some further readings that will be assigned. The scores are themselves historical documents, and will to some extent be treated as such. You should not worry about the unfamiliar early-seventeenth-century typefaces in *L'Orfeo* or the extreme complexity of Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*. If you've noticed these two things you have already learned much. The course is designed for students with an interest in music, with or without previous musical experience, and you will find that with time the scores become old friends.

Recordings: The music for this course is available in streaming form on the course website (see below). If you wish to purchase your own recordings (and you are encouraged to do so), a list of recommended CDs is provided in the textbook and on the course website. Please familiarize yourself with these pieces by listening often to them.

Section meetings: Sections are essential for developing your listening skills and your ability to talk about music in ways that others can understand. Attendance at all section meetings is expected. Plan time to do substantial listening on your own before and after each section meeting. Sections will begin in the third week of the course. In the first two weeks (and continuing beyond this if there is continued interest) a series of workshops will be offered by the teaching staff. These are designed to introduce students to questions of music notation, listening skills, terminology, theoretical matters, and writing about music. You are strongly urged to take advantage of these workshops to familiarize yourself with musical concepts, and to get a sense of the musical skills you are expected to develop in the course. Times for the workshops will be announced in lectures and posted on the course web page.

Website: A website for this course provides supplementary listening information, duplicate versions of certain course materials, pictures with commentaries, links to websites related to materials in the course, an interactive glossary of musical terms, and information about sections and other aspects of the course. You can also use it to send messages to the teaching staff of the course. The website also features a number of self-guided tutorials on fundamentals of music and its terminology, that include interactive aspects and use musical examples from the pieces studied in this course. You will find them interesting and helpful.

You must consult the website regularly for updates, and to incorporate the materials it provides in your study. Address and password will be provided to registered students in the course.

Papers: There are two writing projects in this course:

Paper 1 (five to six pages): write a brief description of the preparations and performance of *Orfeo* or *Messiah* from the point of view of one of the performers. Choose one of the participants in the performance (but not the composer), and write a first-person description of your experiences in rehearsing and performing the work. Use information from your sourcebook, from the score, and from your imagination. Your paper might be in the form of a letter, a diary entry, a chapter in a book of memoirs. You should try to give the flavor of the time, the considerations that a performer might have in preparing and performing the work, and some sense of the musical challenges and delights of this particular performer's role in bringing the work to performance. You may invent any details you wish, so long as they are not inconsistent with information that is available.

Paper 2: In five to six pages, write a review of the piece whose first performance will be given in this course. Use any information available to you, and use your own judgment, which will itself become information. You might wish to interview other spectators for their opinions and observations. You have read a number of reviews of pieces of music, and you have seen that they are often weak in information about the performance itself. Please write a review designed to entertain and inform, and that will also be useful to students in a course called *First Nights* taught at Harvard in 2100.

Grading: Final grades for this course will be based on the following components:

Sections (including attendance, participation, quizzes and other written work):	20 %
First paper	15 %
Review Paper	25 %
Hour examination	15 %
Final Examination	25 %

PLEASE NOTE: Students are expected to complete each of these components for the course. A failing grade in one of these areas will result in a failing grade for the course.

Please note: An essential element of this course is the first performance given on December 18th, the last scheduled class for the semester. The performance is given during the regularly scheduled lecture period. Attendance is essential, not only because the second paper is based on the performance, but also because this performance itself is the capstone of the work of the course. Students should plan their schedules carefully; **those who cannot be present on December 18th, 10-11 a. m., should not take this course.**

COURSE SCHEDULE

Note: All readings should be done in advance of the lecture and section meetings. Listening should be done regularly and repeatedly in advance of and during the weeks spent on each piece.

Introductions

Week 1 (Sept 18, 20). Why are these pieces and their first performances important? Introduction to the techniques of listening.

Weeks 2-3: Saturday, February 24, 1607: Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*

Reading: *First Nights*, Chapter 1; Sourcebook, sections on *L'Orfeo*

Listening: Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*

Lectures:

(Sept 25) The opera and its background; the myth of Orpheus

(Sept 27) Late Renaissance Mantua, Humanism, and Apollo

(Oct 2) The first performance

(Oct 4) Performing forces: singers and instruments; the 'orchestra'

Sections: Guided listening to Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*; attention to conventions of Baroque music

Weeks 4-5: Tuesday, April 13, 1742: George Frideric Handel, *Messiah*

Reading: *First Nights*, Chapter 2; Sourcebook, sections on *Messiah*

Listening: Handel, *Messiah*

Lectures:

(Oct 6, FRIDAY) The oratorio and its backgrounds

(Oct 11) The first performance

(Oct 16) Personnel: orchestra and singers

(Oct 18) Performance problems; performing *Messiah* today

Sections: Guided listening to Handel's *Messiah*; attention to conventions of Baroque music

NOTE: Paper 1 is due at 4 p. m. on Friday, October 20

Weeks 6-7: Friday, May 7, 1824: Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphony No. 9, Opus 125

Reading: *First Nights*, Chapter 3; Sourcebook, sections on Symphony No. 9 (especially the writings by Schiller, Thayer and Schindler, Sourcebook vol. 2, pp. 851ff.)

Listening: Beethoven, Symphony No. 9

Lectures:

(Oct 23) The symphony and its score

(Oct 25) Beethoven's Vienna

(Oct 30) Beethoven's orchestra: Guest performance by the Handel and Haydn Society

(Nov 1) The first performance; modern problems

Sections: Guided listening to the Symphony No. 9; attention to performance details

Monday, November 6: HOUR EXAMINATION

Weeks 8-9: Sunday, December 5, 1830: Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique*

Reading: *First Nights*, Chapter 4; Sourcebook, vol. 2, sections on *Symphonie fantastique* (especially the programs of the symphony and the writing by David Cairns)

Listening: Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique*

Lectures:

(Nov 8) The symphony and its program

(Nov 13) Backgrounds: Paris in 1830

(Nov 15) Guest performance by the Handel and Haydn Society

(Nov 20) The first performance

NOVEMBER 22, WED, DAY BEFORE THANKSGIVING, NO LECTURE

Sections: guided listening to the *Symphonie fantastique*; attention to performance details

Weeks 10-11: Thursday, May 29, 1913: Igor Stravinsky, *Le sacre du printemps*

Reading: *First Nights*, Chapter 5; Sourcebook, sections on *Le sacre du printemps*

Lectures:

(Nov 27) The score and the ballet

(Nov 29) Backgrounds: Paris, Diaghilev, Nijinsky, and Stravinsky

(Dec 4) The music and the ballet

(Dec 6) Preparations

(Dec 11) The first performance

Sections: guided listening to the *Le sacre du printemps*; discussion of choreography

Week 12: Monday, December 18, 2006, 10 a. m. : Premiere to be announced

Dec 13, Dec 18: World premiere performance of a new work to be announced. This work will be discussed, rehearsed, and, finally, performed, in the course of two lecture periods. The work and its performance will be the subject of the second paper, due at a date in Reading Period to be announced.

The final examination will be scheduled by the Registrar.