

Active Listening, Aural Imagination, and 19th-Century Program Music: An In-Class “Experiment”

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When teaching 19th-century Western art music to both music majors and general-education students alike, the debate between advocates for program music versus proponents of absolute music is a fundamental component in a student’s understanding of the Romantic era. The period’s composers and music critics, as we well know, had plenty to say about the topic, and this primary source commentary provides one pillar of that understanding. Analysis of music examples makes for a second pillar. But experiencing precisely *how* music, through aural means alone, can convey to its auditors an image, feeling, or idea of *something* remains a much more elusive notion. This essay will share one possible in-class approach to exploring that topic—an approach that aims to foster a link between a conceptual understanding drawn from various primary-source quotations and an engaged listening activity that encourages students to “see with the mind’s ear” (if you will pardon the mixed metaphor). An experience such as this allows students to approach music listening not as a challenge to their patience and attention spans, but rather it suggests, as [Charles D. Morrison](#) has argued, “that engaged music listening is itself a form of ‘creative activity’” (77).

I present this experience to students as an “experiment.” Particularly for those from outside of music disciplines, a so-called “experimental” approach seems to open up an inviting mode of inquiry to which they are more accustomed, thus yielding greater levels of participation and engagement. Likewise, the idea of an “experiment” connotes that the results might be surprising or unpredictable, and thus student interest is hopefully aroused from the outset, as they await something unexpected.

This experiment unfolds in three separate stages centered on three different music examples. Each stage progresses as follows: an initial discussion of primary source commentary provides a theoretical framework; next, questions are posed which will guide student listening and require their engaged attention; an audio example, sometimes left unidentified, is played for the class, during which they will ponder the questions; and finally, students share their observations and draw conclusions that relate the listening experience back to their understanding of the initial primary sources. In my design, I opted for solo piano character pieces because of their brevity and relative consistency in terms of timbre and texture. Selecting examples from within one genre helps to crystallize students’ focus on the more salient aspects of the task.

The necessary background knowledge comes first, beginning with basic definitions for the concepts of “absolute music” and “program music,” as broadly understood by 19th-century composers, and focusing on the pros and cons raised on both sides of the argument. I employ primary-source commentary from [Franz Liszt](#) and [Eduard Hanslick](#) to situate the debate. Liszt expresses a conviction that music can “convey clearly an image distinctly present in [the

composer's] own mind," and thus a composer should "strive to be fully understood by the aid of a program." In contrast, Hanslick articulates the preference for musical "beauty that is independent and in no need of any external content," while belittling programmatic connections as "poetic fictions" or "paraphrases of a musical work [that] are figurative or wrong." (Note: my chosen quotations were originally determined by the course textbook, in this case the third edition of Mark Evan Bonds' *A History of Music in Western Culture*—see pp. 379–80.) Thus, Liszt and Hanslick function as representatives of the opposite poles in the program vs. absolute dichotomy. As the experiment progresses, however, the significance of such an apparently sharp distinction begins to erode.

With a foundational understanding now in place, the first stage of the experiment asks students to consider the following:

1. What is being depicted or described in this programmatic solo piano piece?
2. Justify and explain your identification by listing the musical characteristics which shaped that image in your mind.

Without identifying the composition in advance, I then play a recording of Edvard Grieg's "[Butterfly](#)," the first number from *Lyric Pieces*, Op. 43 (1886). (Note: sample recordings of the three musical selections used in this activity are in this [Spotify playlist](#).) In the class discussion that follows, students latch onto the generally high tessitura of the piano writing, the rapidly moving melodic figuration, and the chromatic instability of the music's tonal center—traits which give the music a "flighty" or "scampering" quality and suggest something small rather than large. For both music majors and non-majors, this particular selection conjures up very definite visual images, from birds to mice to squirrels and often some "correct" identifications of a butterfly too. This first example seems to argue in favor of Liszt's side of the argument, but by withholding the piece's title, it is also apparent that the music, on its own, permits a range of possible interpretations of the composer's intent, rather than one agreed-upon image.

The experiment's second stage shifts the focus onto the issue of programmatic titles and how such titles might risk limiting a listener's aural imagination. Students are next presented with the following:

1. This programmatic piano piece by American composer Edward MacDowell is a musical depiction of a tall, rocky mountain that MacDowell could see outside his window while composing.
2. What musical characteristics does the composer employ in order to evoke images of mountains in a listener's mind?
3. Rate how successful you find MacDowell's musical representation of mountains to be.

During this stage, I play a recording of MacDowell's "[To the Sea](#)," the first of his *Sea Pieces*, Op. 55 (1898). The careful reader will have certainly caught my little lie—and in general I do not condone lying to students!—but here it is essential to the experiment. By falsely informing students of the composer's programmatic intent, I have hijacked, so to speak, the programmatic process. MacDowell's dense block chords, resonant bass harmonic support, lengthy pedal points, and wide dynamic range all suggest the immensity and grandeur of a mountain. Many students

will hear precisely that, but the final part of the prompt plays a significant role in this stage of the experiment as well. Some listeners, having been specifically tasked to listen critically, may decide that the composer simply did not do a very good job of representing a mountain through musical means. Following the class discussion, the ruse must be revealed. A certain amount of indignation is to be expected when I admit to misleading my classroom of listeners, but those most empathetic with the aesthetic of 19th-century character pieces might be reassured when their suspicions are confirmed that the composer wasn't really writing about mountains in the first place. This stage of the experiment suggests that Hanslick's point of view is not without its merits too, for my lie about MacDowell's programmatic intent was nothing more than the type of "poetic fictions" against which Hanslick had warned.

The final stage presents a contrasting point of view on the issue, that of [Felix Mendelssohn](#). Neither approving of a program's ability to convey an image (like Liszt), nor insisting upon the absence of external content (like Hanslick), Mendelssohn instead argues that the musical notes themselves can convey far more meaning than words ever could. Students are shown the following excerpt ([Bonds](#), 423):

People usually complain that music is so ambiguous, and [that] what they are supposed to think when they hear it is so unclear, while words are understood by everyone. But for me it is exactly the opposite.... [I]ndividual words ... seem to be so ambiguous, so indefinite, in comparison with good music, which fills one's soul with a thousand better things than words.

My chosen musical illustration of Mendelssohn's perspective is his [Song without Words](#), Op. 53, No. 2 (1841). I explain that Mendelssohn provides a tempo indication (*Allegro non troppo*) and just one single clue to his intended emotive connotation, the performance indication "sehr innig." 'Very intimate' or 'very heartfelt' are possible translations. Furthermore, since Mendelssohn called the piece a "song," we can assume he is trying to express *something*, but since he left it "without words," his personal intentions are kept private from both performer and listener. The following questions can accompany this last example:

1. How might Mendelssohn's piece be able to communicate "a thousand better things" through its abandonment of words? Or, do you feel that this music is less communicative because Mendelssohn did not give it an explicit program?
2. Would you categorize this piece as programmatic but with an unstated program? Or, do you consider it absolute because Mendelssohn chose not to reveal his intentions? Does this distinction even matter for your appreciation of the music?

To heighten the "intimacy" of the piece, I like to perform this final example live at the piano, but a recording can serve just as well. When the music is over, one could again engage the class in discussion, but it is arguably better to allow the questions posed in this final stage of the experiment to remain rhetorical ones. After all, Mendelssohn himself made the point that words are "so ambiguous, so indefinite, in comparison with good music."

Score study is not a necessary part of the experiment, thus keeping the task approachable for gen-ed students, although it could easily be incorporated if an instructor so wished. Likewise, although I selected commentary from Liszt, Hanslick, and Mendelssohn, and music by Grieg,

MacDowell, and Mendelssohn, there are of course innumerable possible substitutions of both texts and repertory. In total, this listening experiment is designed to engage students by asking them to become active listeners, not just passive recipients of musical sounds. They must hear imaginatively, listen creatively, think like composers, and bring their critical and historical reflections to bear upon the endlessly fascinating topic of 19th-century program music.

Bibliography

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