

## MUS 104 Music Since 1900

### Reading Responses

About once a week, you will post a response to the assigned reading on the Sakai forum set up for that purpose. One word of caution: avoid composing your response in Microsoft Word and then pasting into the Sakai reply field. It will paste pages of unwanted format information. Instead, compose your response within the Sakai field or in a text-only editor like Notepad or TextEdit.

The response should be two paragraphs long (see example below) and address two main purposes. In the first paragraph, it should critically engage one important point that the author or authors have brought up. I do not want a summary of the reading nor a restatement of the author's point. You also do not have to try to address the entire assigned reading as a whole. On the other hand, it's not enough to simply say that you agree or disagree. I am instead looking for your thoughtful engagement in the issues raised. Feel free to draw upon information from class or other sources.

Second, you will listen to a piece that was mentioned in the reading either online, from the library's DRAM database, the library's Naxos database, or a library CD. I don't expect you to listen to and evaluate an entire opera or other very long work. In such a case, a single movement should suffice. In the second paragraph, discuss the work in the context of your reading. Like the listening responses, your response here should engage what's going on in the music (see the handout on Describing Music) but should not be merely descriptive. Comparisons to other pieces that we have discussed or that you have listened to are especially welcome.

Reading responses are normally graded as full credit, half credit, or no credit. If your response is not sufficient for a full credit grade, I may reply to it or email you with an invitation to revise it. If you do so before the next deadline, I will raise your grade to full credit. Late responses will not receive full credit, and I will not necessarily respond to them. At the end of the semester, your lowest reading response grade will be dropped.

Example reading response:

This week's reading "From Russia with Love" by Sholto Byrnes discusses Dmitri Shostakovich and some of the complex issues of the relationship of his music to the demands of the Soviet state. It's easy to dismiss as empty propaganda pieces like *Funeral March in Memory of the Victims of the Revolution*, but is such a piece so different than other patriotic works like Copland's *A Lincoln Portrait*? The two extreme viewpoints, that Shostakovich was tragically cowed into being a communist shill or that he was a crypto-anti-communist, seem to be caricatures of a much more complex musical personality. The view that he was really an anti-communist was renewed after his death with the appearance of his so-called secret memoirs produced by a musicologist named Solomon Volkov. The internet seems to be full of controversy about this book, with many people calling it a fraud. Nevertheless, it's easy to believe its apparently embittered story of decades of struggle and compromise with Soviet bureaucrats.

I decided to focus on the most famously controversial piece mentioned in the article, Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk*. Stalin's condemnation of this piece ushered in a new era of repression, not only of Shostakovich's modernist pieces but also of the entire artistic community. I found scene 4 on youtube, in which the title character, Katerina, has just poisoned her father-in-law. He calls out for a priest while dying and a foolish priest shows up, but too late. The music is erratic and almost schizophrenic, rather like the characters. The music whipsaws between instruments and tonalities, but the dissonances do not sound brooding and dark, like in the excerpt of *Wozzeck* we saw in class, but sarcastic and impish, as if mocking the priest. The end of the scene climaxes with a huge clash of tonalities, and a new serious tone, almost as if remembering that there is a dead man on the stage. It is a disturbing scene, and I can see how Stalin might have been alarmed at the artistic direction it implied. Nevertheless, I like it much more than the movement from the Fifth Symphony that we heard on the CD.