



Describing Music

When most students arrive at NEC they can identify clearly how music makes them *feel*—but not why it makes them feel that way. What are the specific tools that composers use to elicit emotional responses in their audiences? How do those tools draw on compositional procedures in earlier music, and how do they shape later music? What is musical style, and what can we learn by discussing it in words?

If you have a paper due in a music history course, these questions are even more pressing! Here are some tips that might help:

1. Start with the music. As you listen, write down a few words that come to mind—and remember, at this stage there are no wrong answers.
2. Look at your list of words, and then ask yourself why the music brings about that reaction in you. If you described the music as “lonely” or “spiritual” or “dance-like,” it’s possible that the composer is sending you signals meant to bring out those responses. What is the harmony like? The texture and instrumentation? The meter and rhythmic design? Does the piece change character abruptly, or does it retain the same character for long stretches of time? Does the melody remind you of anything else you’ve heard before?
3. You now have a list of questions to answer—of problems to solve. *This is what musicology is all about.* Now you’re ready to start.