

Q & A: Your Final Paper

What's this paper about?

In this paper you are asked to write an analysis of a composition of your own choice; the composition must be a piece of popular music. The sounds, instruments and production techniques of popular music have particular emotional resonances because of their use in a constellation of similar composition or else their ubiquity in certain cultural situations. In this analysis paper you will take apart the individual elements of your chosen piece asking yourself how they work separately and together to create receptive environments for the emotional state the piece is trying to achieve in their listener.

Analysis?

An analysis is a discussion of the language of the piece. It is not an interpretation. It is: "this piece presents a depressed mood because of its use of the minor mode and low pitched instruments" not "the sadness of this piece reflects P. Diddy's emotional state when he wrote it"

Does it have to be a classical piece?

You should choose a piece of popular music. It is hoped that you will choose a work in a style that you know well. This will make it easier for you to be aware of comparison pieces. Foreign language pieces are okay as long as you provide a translation. (I've read very successful papers about Chinese pop and Korean pop songs).

What should I analyze?

In developing your analysis be sure to consider the following:

- 1) General Considerations
 - a. Relation between transmitter (artist) and receiver (audience)
 - b. Motivation of transmitter
 - c. Intended/actual situation in which the message (composition) is transmitted
 - d. How the work is shaped by these considerations
- 2) Musical considerations and how your work adheres to or deviates from the norms of the style:
 - a. Durational aspects: of the work, its sections and the relation between sections
 - b. Rhythmic motives: in accompaniment figures, percussive figures and the melody
 - c. Melodic aspects: register, motive
 - d. Texture and Tonality: where does the texture change, is it major or minor?
 - e. Dynamic aspects: loudness, softness, relation between loud areas and soft areas.
 - f. Instrumental aspects: What instruments are used, their timbres, what associations do these have
 - g. Acoustic aspects: extraneous noise? Perceived distance of performer to listener
 - h. Formal Aspects: what's the form of the piece
 - i. Recording aspects: echo? Delay? How does the sound of the piece contribute to its meaning? This is important and overlooked. If Singer X were performing for you on a piano in your living room, they would rarely if ever sound the way they do on the recording.
 - j. The ways in which these elements interact on a simultaneous or successive level
 - k. Textual aspects: how does the composer set the text? Which came first, text or music? How does the text contribute to aspects a-j?
- 3) Similar pieces
 - a. Develop a constellation of similar pieces, use them to prove your point. For instance: There are "oohs" in the background of the chorus. "Oohs" in this context have a specific cultural connotation. Prove that connotation, for instance "devotion," because "oohs" are used in Song X, Song Y, Song Z to indicate "devotion."

Understanding these aspects of the work will help you formulate your analysis. In the paper you should explore how these aspects work together to help the piece sound, express and mean. You may find it helpful to compare the individual aspects of your piece with similar elements of other pieces in the style.

Is this a research paper?

Please bear in mind that this is **not** a research paper. The ideas you present should be your own original ideas.

What should I avoid in this paper?

- 1) Plot Summary – you know the piece, your reader can listen to it. Don't waste time recounting the chronological details of the piece. Nonetheless, don't assume too much, be specific in your references. Use the format (Minute:Seconds) to refer to a specific moment in the song.
- 2) Biography – The idea that a piece of music reflects the emotions / feelings etc of the performer / composer etc is a nineteenth-century fiction. The sounding object has no relation to the fact that so-and-so ran away from home as a child.
- 3) Critical Opinion – you aren't judging the merit of the piece. You are analyzing its rhetoric.
- 4) Poetry analysis – this is a paper about the music, not the lyrics. However, the lyrics do inform the way you hear the music and may give a hint as to the emotions suggested.
- 5) Wikipedia – you won't find the answers to your questions on wikipedia.
- 6) Plagiarism –
 - a. Any nonfactual or obscure factual element you reference needs to be footnoted.
 - b. See Wikipedia above

I don't understand. Can you give me a model?

Please read/view the following resources. They can be used as models:

- 1) Summaries of two recent analyses of popular song (the Kojak theme, see below, and Abba's Fernando) in Raymond Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* p. 285-294. This is posted on the class website.
- 2) Video versions of the actual analyses:
 - a. the theme of Kojak:
 - i. Part One - Visual Analysis: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbzPGLVAD4Y>
 - ii. Part Two - Musical Analysis: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-acVjh1mfBQ>
 - b. Abba's Fernando
 - i. Many parts: begin here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i00kpC2mR6U>
- 3) Similar analyses by the same person can be found on YouTube for such hits as: "Intel Inside"
- 4) I've attached Rob Walker's *New York Times Magazine* article on Pandora: "The Song Decoders" to the website. Read it.

Assume that your reader has knowledge of music, but not necessarily a knowledge, beyond a cursory one, of the style you are studying. Use references whenever possible, though be extremely wary of Internet references. The paper should be academic in tone, though not dry.

When is it due?

Anytime between March 24-9: Prospectus

April 14: Final Paper

May 3: Revised version of paper.

Huh?

Prospectus: You should prepare a one paragraph "prospectus." In it you should

- 1) Choose a piece; this is the object you will study; you should choose a commercially released recording of the song as your object of inquiry (i.e. not an "unplugged" or "live" version).
- 2) Give you initial gut impulses regarding the piece's emotional core.
- 3) List 3-5 pieces that are similar in resonance.
- 4) Give me a link to where I can hear the piece – many popular songs can be found on YouTube.
- 5) You may submit this as hardcopy or as a pdf file (only).

I will listen to the piece and tell you whether I think you will be able to do it, as well as offer suggestions as to what you should look into in your analysis. I will respond to the prospectuses in the order in which they are received. *Expect approximately a one-week turnaround.* Late prospectuses mean late responses. Should you feel your piece is too hard, I will allow you to change it, but I must approve the new piece.

Final Paper: Your final paper should be 8-10 pages and is due on **Wednesday, April 14.** I will read them in the order in which they are received. If your specific piece isn't available on YouTube, you should email

an mp3 file of your piece to: tarantinohum@gmail.com. Please let me know if you do this as I do not otherwise check this email address. Please also provide links to other pieces you reference in the paper. Attach the lyrics of the song as an appendix (this is not a part of your page count). Please transliterate lyrics in foreign scripts (e.g. Pinyin for Mandarin/Cantonese) and provide a translation.

Revision: After you turn in your paper, I will grade them and comment on them in the order they are received. *Expect up to a two-week turnaround.* You will either receive comments and a grade or comments only. If you receive a grade, you may choose to stop. If not, you are expected to revise the paper based on my suggestions and new ideas you may have. If you choose to revise your paper, it will be due on the final day of class, **May 3.**

Can I email you my paper?

I do not accept emailed papers. You must provide me with a hard copy.

What format should I use?

Also please note: Standard file formats apply: 1 inch margins; Arial or Times 12 point font. Spell check and grammar check – sections of your paper that are unreadable indicate that you did not read it before handing it in. Be sure to footnote all ideas that are not your own; a bibliography is not necessary.

Can I use someone else's ideas as my own, without crediting them?

Do not plagiarize. I reserve the right to fail (zero) any paper that is plagiarized or that features plagiarized passages. Makeups and revisions are not allowed for plagiarized papers.

I need more help

- 1) The music should be the primary focus of your analysis. Use it and the lyrics to reflect your hypothesis of what the work is trying to "say." This is a paper about music, not about poetry.
- 2) Refer to specific moments in the work by using the minutes and seconds at which it happens. Try not to narrate the elements of the piece, e.g. "The song begins with a fast tempo, the voices rise and fall. What follows is a more calm section in which things slow down. After that, the singer screams and the music becomes wild again before relaxing into a groove." Your reader/listener can detect many of these things themselves. That said, detailed discussion of musical elements is essential to backing up your argument.
- 3) Do not devote your paper solely to the lyrics. Show how the lyrics are reflected in the music.
- 4) You are encouraged to use a piece from a style that you know well.
- 5) Should you wish to consult secondary sources, I suggest you check the databases at JSTOR and RILM:
JSTOR: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/databases/1959655.html>
RILM: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/databases/2710784.html>
There are also other catalogs that can search databases of reviews of albums. Check the library's webpage for other catalogs and databases. There is also Grove Music Online. Remember please that this is **not** a research paper. Secondary sources are pretty much unnecessary.
- 6) YouTube is a great resource for building stylistic constellations, see what pieces YouTube suggests in reference to your piece – listen to them, determine what is the same, what is different. Pandora is similar.
- 7) Please follow traditional style formats; cite all sources with footnotes.
- 8) Email me with specific questions