



## RPS Young Classical Writers Prize

### Some expert recommendations...

Since launching the RPS Young Classical Writers Prize in 2021, we've welcomed hundreds of entries, bursting with imagination and passion for music. It's so heartening to see. Each year, we've appointed new guest panellists to review applications with us, and we have treasured their perspectives. As experts in writing about classical music themselves, they bring a wealth of insight, and from year to year, we've been taking notes of their insights and recommendations. Drawn from this, we're pleased to provide some principles here, which they continue to live by in their own writing. Whether you're embarking on a submission for the RPS Young Classical Writers Prize, or generally seeking insights and encouragement for any writing about music, we hope you find some useful pointers and inspiration in what follows.

---

**First of all, think about your audience.** This will always be different. For our assignment, we ask you to consider writing for a music-loving audience who are not necessarily familiar with complex technical language. Often, you'll find yourself writing for such an audience so, in such instances, remember...

- **It's not an essay.** No footnotes nor bibliography required, and the writing style doesn't need to be too formal. In fact, it can be nice to be a bit conversational to help draw people in.
- **It's not a lecture, either.** So make sure you aren't treating your reader like a school pupil. Also, try not to make it sound like you're 'telling off' a performer or composer for not doing something 'properly' (which is how language in reviews can sound if we're not careful!).
- **Don't use technical terms without explanation.** They can easily be alienating or feel elitist to those unfamiliar. Ideally, avoid them altogether but, if you do want to make a point about something that uses specific language, or assumes - for instance - harmonic understanding, find a way of explaining what you mean for those who might not know.
- **Don't tell us how to feel.** By all means share the emotional impact of something *on you*, but make sure you're not effectively telling your reader that they should behave or react in a particular way. They might not!
- **Translate always.** If you include a word, phrase, title or quotation in another language, don't assume your audience will speak that language. Help them out.

**Tell us a story, from start to finish.** That doesn't mean you necessarily need to make it all one continuous narrative, but help us to follow the arch of your thoughts and explanations. So...

- **Draw us in.** You might like to start with an opener that grabs our attention and draws us into your piece. It could be a bold conversation-starter, perhaps in the form of a question or a debatable statement; or it might just be a really neat quotation from a composer, performer or someone else with a special insight, such as someone who heard it first, attending the premiere.

- **Make sure you follow through.** Don't present a strong proposition or question at the start if you don't then devote yourself to addressing it in what follows. The bold opening could end up being the sole piece of your article that sticks out. In which case, find another, gentler way in.
- **Lead us through your argument/narrative.** Make sure that paragraphs lead nicely from one to the next, and that any sudden changes of mood or topic are explained, and make sense across the whole piece. Be careful in making passing references to things that may leave the reader perplexed. Meanwhile try not to ramble: get to each point you wish to make clearly and succinctly. Reading your writing aloud can be a very good way of checking this. And don't drop the ball. If you present a proposition at the start, or as you go along, make sure you resolve it in some regard. You don't have to end where you began, but don't leave the reader feeling you've drifted from where you started. Make the ending feel like a fitting ending to what's come before. When complete, ask yourself if the piece addresses every issue it raises.
- **Don't overwrite.** If you have a point that you want to make strongly, you may like to make it at the beginning and again at the end. Given the length of an assignment like this, repeating it much more than that is unnecessary and can tire the reader. Similarly, we're sometimes tempted to resort to three adjectives instead of one or two, to hammer home our point. Sometimes we're inclined to be alliterative too, so such terms start neatly, nicely and nerdishly with the same letter. But does the music always warrant that, or are we getting in its way by doing that? Sometimes – even when writing about Mahler – less is more.
- **Consider your 'tone of voice'.** Again, this is a good one to check by reading aloud. Are you aiming for chatty? Earnest? Excited? Building in intensity? There's a time and a place for all, but make sure you've decided for yourself, and maintain the tone, to bind the writing together. Be aware that quotations, or something you particularly like about another person's description, can end up swaying the way you write if you're not careful.
- **Keep to the brief.** If you're submitting a piece to a publication or website, be aware of their general tone and content and 'house style' – you might be wise to ask the person commissioning you if they have such a thing, or at least seek their general expectations. Make sure you've read, and are familiar with, the publication or website itself.

**Be a good researcher/reporter.** If someone else is going to publish your writing in print or online, they need to know they can trust your writing and your work. So...

- **Do the research.** If you're filling us in on the historical/social context of a particular piece, make sure you've researched this properly and fully, using all sources at your disposal. Don't just assume the first results you find on Google or a downloaded programme note will tell you everything you need to know. Check around, and look for reliable resources, and never quote from Wikipedia. By all means, use the source list at the bottom of a Wikipedia entry to do your own digging, but you should assume that Wikipedia is more wrong than right.
- **Facts, not fable.** This follows on from above, but involves some very specific things. Don't tell us someone was heartbroken when they wrote a piece unless you have evidence to suggest that was the case – and if you do, share it! Quote a letter, a diary, or whatever you've found. Can you *really* claim that you know how an audience member felt in 1805? If you can, then it must be because you have a source to tell you. So share that. (Or tell us you have a TARDIS. But you'll need to prove that instead...)
- **Quotations are good.** Quotations can be really helpful in giving us the perspective of a composer, friend or critic. There's power in words that come straight from the horse's mouth. That said, keep them short, especially if you're quoting another writer, so it doesn't look like your writing is largely just a collage of theirs.
- **Check your spelling – and that includes diacritics.** Make sure you've read through your work carefully, and looked up any spellings that you're unsure of. And remember that diacritics (that is to say, accents and the like) are a crucial part of a composer's name – they are part of spelling. He's called Antonín Dvořák, not Dvorak; and it's Belá Bartók, not Bela Bartok. Diacritics are just a shorthand for spelling and pronunciation in most languages, so it's really important to get them right.
- **Be reliable.** Your writing alone won't get you more commissions: the way in which you submit and present it matters too. If you're set a deadline, you must meet it. No excuses. Most publications need to be designed and go to print within a tight schedule and, if you're late, an editor simply won't use you. And write to length, too. Don't assume that others will cut the copy for you – which is a bit like expecting people to tidy up after

you. Nor should you plead for publications to squeeze the extra words in. If you're given a word count, there'll be a very good reason for it that you need to respect.

**On tricky subjects and value judgements.** Classical music, like so many aspects of Western European culture which have been dominated by the white middle and upper classes, is a topic where evolving understanding and rethinking old prejudices is a continuous work in progress. That means there are certain subjects that need particular care when it comes to language, and explanations. For instance...

- **Gender divides.** For many decades it was standard practice to refer to men by their surnames, and women by their first names, e.g. Schumann and Clara Schumann. This is now widely considered patriarchal and patronising. Clara Schumann is just as entitled to be called 'Schumann' as Robert Schumann. Of course in a case like this, where two people share the same surname, you need to be careful that it's always clear who you're referring to. Ask a friend to read through your work and check that they can make sense of it if you're unsure about this.
- **Appropriated traditions.** Over the years, we've seen some sensitive and thoughtful writing on how to deal with composers appropriating traditions as a result of colonial power, for instance. If you find yourself writing about music where this is relevant, be sure to flag it and discuss it. Check with other writers who have more experience if you're unsure, or would like some help in knowing how to do this sensitively.
- **Folk music and Orientalism.** The word 'oriental' is Western European, very broad and fairly outdated now. There's a lot of complex writing on the cultural significance of orientalism, which you may or may not want to engage with! You may have reason to use such a term if you're trying to capture a composer's outlook at the time they wrote the piece, but handle such terms with care, as they could often benefit some subtler and more up-to-date explanation. Similarly think carefully about referring to someone in terms of their nationality or use of folk music. Too readily we compartmentalise composers like Smetana and Vaughan Williams as 'nationalist', but forget that Austro-German composers (and above all Beethoven) also worked with regional traditions. And that brings us nicely to...
- **The Great Composers and their Masterpieces.** Yes, these are *really* loaded words, and many applicants to the RPS compellingly argue that there's room for a whole lot more variety than we might sometimes see in concert programmes. So don't be tempted to fall back on superlatives like this as if they're self-explanatory and obvious. You might think Brahms is an uncontested great composer; others may easily disagree. So don't just tell us he's great. What's so great about him? Why should we listen to and care about his music? Be specific. Talk us round.

**Two final things...** The best writing about music makes the reader want to hear the music itself. It's clear, well-contextualised, and includes a compelling case for listening to the piece. It's thoughtful about the tough stuff: gender politics, racial issues, and so on. And it doesn't rely on received wisdom or accepted norms, such as telling us something is a masterpiece without reasoning why. It's about people: the person who wrote the music, the person who is telling us about it in their writing, the people performing it, and the person reading. The best writing remembers the human connection that makes music happen.

**Enjoy it.** You can almost tell when a writer has enjoyed writing about music. Not because it's full of giddy hyperbole, nor because the writer simply resorts to gushing how much they love it. It's subtler than that: in each successive sentence, you can almost feel their enthusiasm for delving deeper into the music, and it makes the reader more inclined to join them. If you're not enjoying what you have to write, likely the reader won't either.

**Good luck, and keep writing!**