

## Reading Primary Sources Analytically

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At a recent professional development workshop at Eastern Connecticut State University with Robert DiYanni and Anton Borst of New York University, DiYanni asked the faculty to define critical reading.<sup>1</sup> A product of similar workshops in the past, my answer focused on moving from looking for the gist to engaging with the text and making interpretations. My colleague in the English department, Ben Pauley, put the same definition more eloquently as “defying the habits of skimming.”

That keyword *habit* stands out to me because skimming (looking for the “general idea” or the “basic point” as students sometimes call it) is a standard approach to reading for many of our students. For some, this may reflect a desire to consume the text in one bite out of excitement to rush to *the* answer and avoid the uncomfortable tension of ambiguity. For others, it reveals discomfort with close reading or even reading in general. Such students want to get into and out of a text as quickly as possible. For still others, the gist is what they have been taught to identify; they don’t know another way. This orientation becomes especially problematic when we explore primary source readings in class, which:

- come from a range of genres,
- are not always built on a linear argument and often contain ambiguity,
- may not have one or any obvious point,
- are not self-interpreting (i.e., they may not contain explicit conclusions or reflections on their subject matter),
- are rarely written like textbooks with straightforward and organized information, and
- appear frequently in fragments or excerpts (as Blake Howe laments above).

Such challenges—some emanating from student attitudes and others created by primary sources themselves—highlight the need to develop concrete

1. This 2017 workshop was part of a multi-year project called “Critical Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines,” funded by a Davis Foundation Grant.

strategies for teaching students to analyze historical documents in focused and intentional ways.

Although examining different types of documents (letters, diaries, journalism, treatises, etc.) might require different approaches and activities, students often need to develop foundational, analytical reading habits in order to make meaningful and nuanced claims about historical artifacts. Pedagogically-minded scholarship from the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition can provide useful models for facilitating deeper engagement with source readings. Employing basic rhetorical analysis strategies as a means of exploring primary sources and historical content fosters analytical habits that supercede skimming tendencies and open avenues for rich discussion, meaningful interpretation, and further examination of music-historical issues. To demonstrate, I will explore a pedagogical approach to source readings adapted primarily from David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen's *Writing Analytically*.<sup>2</sup>

### The Method

Despite its title, *Writing Analytically* is as much a textbook about flexible analytical techniques to be adopted by college students as it is about writing strategy. Rosenwasser and Stephen focus the early chapters on developing analytical thinking and reading habits, proposing what they call “analytical moves” adaptable to varied classroom situations involving text, image, and/or sound in which students are actively involved in interpretation, problem-solving, and discussion.<sup>3</sup>

One of these moves—a rhetorical analysis strategy that the authors call “The Method”—teaches students to look for word repetitions, strands of keywords (“What goes with what?”), and binaries (“What is opposed to what?”) and pushes students toward interpreting the significance of these patterns.<sup>4</sup> Operating under the assumption that a text (in the broad sense of the word) is a piece of thinking, this approach teaches students how to dissect and relate parts of a text, even when it lacks clarity and resists linear organization. Rosenwasser and Stephen describe The Method as “a form of mental doodling,”<sup>5</sup> by which one can “gain entry to the logic of [the] subject matter.”<sup>6</sup> The image of “gaining entry” suggests not that analytical readers crack a code but rather attend closely

2. David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen, *Writing Analytically*, 7th ed. (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2015). I developed this pedagogical approach in part through a workshop on teaching students to read and write analytically, run by Stephen and Rosenwasser at Muhlenberg College in 2014.

3. *Ibid.*, 16.

4. *Ibid.*, 26.

5. *Ibid.*, 27.

6. *Ibid.*, 28.

to the language of a text in order to track the author's thought and find layers of potential meaning.<sup>7</sup> The Method helps students notice the details of the text and thus establish a foundation for critical interpretation. As Robert DiYanni puts it, "Seeing more, they have more to think about, and ultimately more to say and write about what they think."<sup>8</sup>

With its framework that draws students' attention to the fine, quirky, and strategic aspects of a text as preparation for leaps of interpretation, The Method provides a useful tool for source-reading-based classroom discussion. More of an analytical technique than a defined pedagogy, The Method could serve a variety of classroom uses. Although the depth of inquiry and application might vary among intro-level courses, the music history survey, and special topics electives, my aim in the following analysis is not to prescribe particular uses and course outcomes for The Method but rather to demonstrate its power to instill critical reading habits, to generate questions and discussion, and to foster historical exploration appropriate to a range of courses.

### **Applying The Method to Debussy**

To illustrate these qualities of The Method in a classroom setting, I have chosen a conversation between an early-career Claude Debussy and his former teacher, Ernest Guiraud, at the Paris Conservatoire. Then-student Maurice Emmanuel transcribed what Lockspeiser calls "some of the main points" of the dialogue sometime during 1889–1890.<sup>9</sup> This source reading provides a means of exploring aspects of Debussy's musical thought (as affirmed by the several resources that reproduce the document),<sup>10</sup> but, despite its simple conversational structure, it also challenges student expectations for a text to evince linear argument or organization. This text thus provides an opportunity to build transferable analytical reading skills that lead to richer historical understanding and exploration in the classroom.

7. Ibid., 3.

8. Robert DiYanni, "Reading Responsively, Reading Responsibly: An Approach to Critical Reading," in *Critical Reading Across the Curriculum*, ed. Robert DiYanni and Anton Borst (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 8.

9. Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, Vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 204.

10. Lockspeiser's Appendix B contains the entire conversation (pp. 204–208); versions excerpted from Lockspeiser appear in Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Western World*, 2nd Ed. (Belmont: Thomson Schirmer, 2008), 355–356 and Eric Frederick Jensen, *Debussy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–144. There are some textual variations among the sources, features that might facilitate another interesting historiographical activity on critical editing and translation practices. But I leave such pedagogical ideas to Brooks Kuykendall, this *Journal*.

I implement The Method by asking students to notice repeating words/ideas and to jot down any themes<sup>11</sup> (a collection of keywords that go together in some way) and binaries (keywords that oppose each other) in a text while a volunteer reads the text aloud and the class follows along.<sup>12</sup> If I were to apply The Method in class to this document, which I use to introduce aspects of modernism in the music history survey, I would focus students' attention on keywords/themes/binaries that provide a window into Debussy's philosophy of music, particularly what he values and rejects. I encourage the reader to try this exercise with the excerpt reproduced here:

Debussy: [...] 24 semitones = 36 tones in the octave with 18 different degrees. No faith in the supremacy of the C major scale. The tonal scale must be enriched by other scales.

I am not misled by equal temperament. Rhythms are stifling. Rhythms cannot be contained within bars. It is nonsense to speak of 'simple' and 'composed' time. There should be an interminable flow of them both without seeking to bury the rhythmic patterns. Relative keys are nonsense too. Music is neither major nor minor. Minor thirds and major thirds should be combined, modulation thus becoming more flexible. The mode is that which one happens to choose at the moment. It is inconstant. In *Tristan* the themes heard in the orchestra are themes of the action. They do no violence to the action. There must be a balance between musical demands and thematic evocation. Themes suggest their orchestral coloring.

Guiraud (*Debussy having played a series of intervals on the piano*): What's that?

Debussy: Incomplete chords, floating. *Il faut noyer le ton*. One can travel where one wishes and leave by any door. Greater nuances.

Guiraud: But when I play this [French augmented-sixth built on A-flat] it has to resolve.

Debussy: I don't see that it should. Why?

Guiraud: Well, do you find this [parallel, root-position F major, G major, and A minor triads] lovely?

Debussy: Yes, yes yes!

Guiraud: But how would you get out of this [parallel, second-inversion F major, A-flat major, and G-flat major triads]? I am not saying that what you do isn't beautiful, but it's theoretically absurd.

11. "Themes" seems to be more accessible than "strands" for students learning these techniques for the first time, and I often use the terms interchangeably.

12. The Method takes various forms in my teaching; I frame the activity and emphasize each step in different ways depending on students' familiarity with the technique, time constraints, and the plan for applying its results. Throughout this article, I present the most systematic and explicitly laid-out version in order to make the logic of each component evident to the reader.

Debussy: There is no theory. You have merely to listen. Pleasure is the law.

Guiraud: I would agree with you in regard to an exceptional person who has discovered a discipline for himself and who has an instinct which he is able to impose. But how would you teach music to others?

Debussy: Music cannot be learnt.

Guiraud: Come now, you are forgetting that you yourself were ten years at the Conservatoire.

Debussy (*He agrees to this and admits that there can nevertheless be a doctrine.*): Yes, this is silly. Except that I can't reconcile all this. True enough, I feel free because I have been through the mill, and I don't write in the fugal style because I know it. (*He is astonishingly direct in discussion and never seeks to avoid a point with a joke.*) [...] <sup>13</sup>

After students make individual observations on paper during the first part of The Method, I pool the data they have gleaned from an excerpt by putting keywords, themes, and binaries on the board as students take turns listing them. The board becomes a way of representing the accumulation of information as each student (in a class of about fifteen) contributes to a collective map of the text; the board also provides a space for arranging and rearranging this information as more students contribute new details and suggest alternate groupings. We sometimes get started by listing individual keywords (repetitions or words that struck students as important in response to the prompt), but I nudge them to organize these words into themes and binaries if they have not done so voluntarily, either through modelling the practice myself by starting to connect related or opposing words on the board as students list them or by explicitly requesting them to name themes/binaries with support from the text; in both cases, students are asked to expand these groupings with additional words from their lists. Some of students' themes/binaries might be more pertinent than others, but this is not the time to evaluate comprehension; if they are missing anything on my priority list, I propose an unstated theme or binary, which students are invited once again to flesh out with recourse to the text. Some possible themes (with keywords) that might emerge from the Debussy text are:

- RESISTANCE: “no faith,” “nonsense,” “don't see,” “free,” “music cannot be learnt,” “there is no theory”
- PLEASURE: “lovely,” “pleasure is the law,” “beautiful,” “Yes, yes, yes!”

13. Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, 206–207. This excerpt is reproduced by permission of Cambridge University Press. This extract cannot be reproduced, shared, altered, or exploited commercially in any way without the permission of Cambridge University Press, as it is copyrighted material and therefore not subject to the allowances permitted by a CC-BY licence.

- EDUCATION: “Conservatoire,” “free,” “the mill,” “Music cannot be learnt”
- MUSIC THEORY/ELEMENTS (many of which are articulated by Debussy in binaries): “C major scale” vs. “enriched by other scales,” “octave,” “equal temperament,” “rhythms contained within bars” (“simple” and “composed”<sup>14</sup>) vs. “interminable flow,” “relative keys” vs. “flexible modulation,” “musical demands” vs. “thematic evocation,” “orchestral coloring,” “resolution” vs. “floating,” “fugal style”

An additional organizing binary of two themes that students might observe is:

- RESTRICTION (“stifling,” “contained,” “has to resolve,” “learnt,” “Conservatoire,” “the mill”) vs. FREEDOM/EXPANSION (“enriched,” “interminable flow,” “flexible,” “choose,” “inconstant,” “where one wishes,” “nuances,” “no theory”)

Notice that several keywords appear in multiple themes. The point of this exercise is not to give a fixed identity to specific keywords as if the text were a puzzle with a single solution (binary or theme, Theme 1 or Theme 2) but rather to explore all the possible ways that individual words might be linked with various themes and binaries in the text, sometimes in perplexing ways (e.g., the word “free” appears linked broadly in Debussy’s rhetoric with positive themes emphasizing flexibility, choice, resistance, and pleasure; yet Debussy says his freedom results from doing his time at “the mill,” giving “free” a role to play in Debussy’s negative remarks on education in particular). Themes overlap; binaries are nested in others. The messiness of this exercise is part of the point because it helps students become aware that texts are multidimensional/multi-layered and that reading is an act of mapping, organizing, and thus interpreting.

Also note that the outcome of this exercise is not predetermined. Even if there may be themes and binaries the instructor wishes to highlight for the purposes of the lesson, this activity empowers students to make observations (even when they find the document confusing at first), to contribute to the class’s map of themes and binaries, and to make connections that highlight nuance and complexity within the text. Interpretations are built from scratch through the class’s direct engagement with the text.

The Method can have an especially valuable impact on critical thinking if I invite students to explain why they connected certain words, why they chose a particular theme or binary, and to consider alternate groupings. This requires students to question, justify, and refocus their analytical organization

14. Weiss and Taruskin say “compound” here as a logical opposition to “simple”; it is unclear whether the discrepancy is a misprint of Lockspeiser’s “composed” or a correction to it.



in order to arrive at more meaningful data and to move toward interpretation. For example, a student might suggest a BEAUTY theme initially for the words “lovely” and “beautiful” in the Debussy excerpt (as I did when I started making the list of possible themes above), but as more words become linked with this theme (“pleasure is the law,” “Yes, yes, yes!”), the class benefits from considering a more precise theme name that accounts for the new data. This invitation to specify the categories may reinforce the validity of students’ initial labels/groupings, but, in the case of Debussy’s remarks, it might spur the class to realize that Debussy is talking more precisely about an unbridled form of PLEASURE rather than BEAUTY as a general aesthetic concept or subjective preference. For another example, students might initially add Guiraud’s phrase “theoretically absurd” correctly to the MUSIC THEORY/ELEMENTS theme, but if I ask them to explain why, they may realize that “theoretically absurd” is Guiraud’s judgment of Debussy’s espoused compositional freedom and that the phrase is more specifically cast in a binary with Debussy’s understanding of theory as a hindrance to pleasure: “There is no theory. You have merely to listen. Pleasure is the law.” Ultimately, asking students to engage in some form of reflexive (re)calculation pushes the discussion gradually toward interpretation because students are not merely linking synonyms and amassing data but also thinking about the relationships and purposes of such words in context with strategic guidance from the instructor.

In questioning our categories and highlighting the relationships within the text, the Debussy activity has approximated the next steps in Rosenwasser and Stephen’s Method, which asks students to rank and relate the details to the reading as a whole and to identify and recategorize anomalies. This ranking and recategorizing process—for which Rosenwasser and Stephen suggest a period of free-writing—leads to more nuanced interpretation by revealing outliers in the text, which will frequently be “part of a strand you had not detected (and perhaps one side of a previously unseen binary)”<sup>15</sup> and thus cause us to “revise our assumptions.”<sup>16</sup>

Another way that I sometimes move students toward interpretation is to stir their curiosity regarding the groupings and contrasts. When outlining another analytical technique called “Notice & Focus,” which emphasizes how to highlight and “define significant parts” of a text, Rosenwasser and Stephen describe ranking these significant parts as a way to “dwell with the data”—that is, a way to focus on what is “interesting (or significant or revealing or strange)” about particular details.<sup>17</sup> If we incorporate the language of interesting/odd/meaningful into The Method-based classroom exercise, then it encourages

15. Rosenwasser and Stephen, *Writing Analytically*, 27.

16. *Ibid.*, 26.

17. *Ibid.*, 17, 18.

students to become curious about and interrogate their data. What is odd or interesting about the language (i.e., keywords and their relationships) in the Debussy example? Students might:

- be perplexed by the composer's resistance to the traditional categories and conventions of music theory—especially if they have been immersed in common practice tonality up to this point—and his disparagement of education. (Hopefully, they do not question the value of their own education in the process.)
- wonder at Debussy's lack of commitment (i.e., an anomaly in the text) when he speaks so vociferously against tradition but ultimately admits the reality of “doctrine” in the end.
- be curious what Debussy means by freedom in this context or about the sonic implications of his philosophical statements about specific musical elements.

Whatever students find interesting in the text (even if it is only Debussy's incomplete sentences), interesting/odd/meaningful privileges curiosity, questioning, and the desire to make sense of the observed patterns and contrasts.

### Generating Claims and Questions

In both Notice & Focus and The Method, Rosenwasser and Stephen suggest we ask “So what?” (“Why does this matter?”) as a provocation to interpret significance.<sup>18</sup> The question implies that odd or interesting features observed in patterns, contrasts, and anomalies invite explanation. For example, the authors claim that binaries often indicate something is “at stake” in the text, that the text is wrestling with an idea or issue and using a textual strategy to articulate meaningful connections and distinctions.<sup>19</sup> Proposing a similar path from observation and connection to inferring meaning and highlighting values in the text,<sup>20</sup> DiYanni reminds us that these interpretations must “be grounded in and supported by the details [students] observe and the connections they establish—textual evidence in short.”<sup>21</sup> The hard work of categorizing and ranking prepares us for such evidence-based leaps of interpretation; skimming is no longer an option.

The “So what?” question might appear at various stages in a classroom analysis of primary sources (Rosenwasser and Stephen place it at every stage of The Method); but I often try to keep students from coming to knee-jerk conclusions

18. *Ibid.*, 23, 26.

19. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

20. DiYanni, “Reading Responsively, Reading Responsibly,” 10–12.

21. *Ibid.*, 10.



through the early steps of primary source analysis exercises. Of course, interpretation has been a key component of categorizing, ranking, and reconfiguring all along, but emphasizing “So what?” after the information gathering process allows the class to focus entirely on discerning implications,<sup>22</sup> highlighting assumptions,<sup>23</sup> and connecting the text with issues beyond its boundaries.<sup>24</sup> The “So what?” question, which I interpret as a placeholder for any question that might provoke interpretation, could take numerous forms for the Debussy excerpt. For example: What do you think Debussy is working against and advocating for? Or how do the binaries and themes we identified help him articulate his perspective? Through these “So what?” questions—which they can explore through freewriting, pair/share, or general discussion—students might make the following interpretive summaries of Debussy’s views:

- Compositional freedom involves disrupting conventions and institutions.
- Music education is not an expansion of the mind but rather a restriction of its creative possibilities.
- Compositional freedom offers a type of personal liberation and a form of pleasure.
- Musical creation is more instinctive than rational, and musical parameters are fluid rather than fixed concepts.
- One does not need to rationalize musical sound in order to enjoy it.
- These musical ideas extend to all parameters of sound and thus have implications for the entire artistic process and product.<sup>25</sup>

Along with empowering individual interpretations, by unpacking and extending the implications of the text’s language strategy, this activity helps students see the text’s significance from multiple angles. Through their peers’ diverse takeaways, they realize there is no general idea but rather a plurality of claims to make. These interpretive claims might lead students to respond with another set of questions or interpretations that build on the first round of conclusions. Indeed, Rosenwasser and Stephen highlight the usefulness of “asking ‘So what?’ in a chain” of interpretations.<sup>26</sup> Students might ask:

- What was Debussy’s experience at the Conservatoire, and why does he seem to be resistant to his rational, theoretical training? Is he being ironic or sincere?

22. Rosenwasser and Stephen, *Writing Analytically*, 21–25.

23. *Ibid.*, 56–58.

24. DiYanni, “Reading Responsively, Reading Responsibly,” 11–12.

25. See Jensen, *Debussy*, 144 for commentary on this interview that ranks and interprets Debussy’s remarks on sound and tradition. See also, Weiss and Taruskin, *Music in the Western World*, 355.

26. Rosenwasser and Stephen, *Writing Analytically*, 23.

- How do these ideas and their abrasive rhetoric translate into musical style, and what would it mean if we were to discover that the rhetoric does not match practice entirely?
- How does Debussy's modernist worldview compare to those of his contemporaries, and how does this comparison help us situate the composer in his time and place?
- Where do Debussy's remarks fit in the history of music theory?
- Does pleasure have layers of meaning beyond entertainment in Debussy's cultural context?

I highlight the many directions The Method might lead a class discussion to emphasize the technique's power to generate meaningful and multidimensional interpretations and questions grounded in the particulars of a primary source document. I do not mean to suggest, however, that a class ought to go in *all* of those directions unless that is the very point of the exercise. Indeed, our "So what?" questions should be crafted to serve the unique content demands, learning outcomes, and time constraints of individual courses. A class's analysis of Debussy's text, for example, could set up a range of activities including using some of the class's claims as lenses for analyzing Debussy's musical style, laying the groundwork for a rich discussion of his writings, building a basis for comparison with other contemporaneous perspectives, or providing means of generating research questions that students can explore on their own. The Method is not an end in itself but rather can be a productive catalyst for exploration within and outside the classroom. Whether the technique supports a composer-centered study of style and biography, a broad survey of intellectual history, or a special-topics focus on particular cultural or aesthetic issues, close rhetorical analysis of primary source documents through reading techniques like The Method can lead to meaningful, student-directed historical claims, questions, and applications in both the most rudimentary and the most sophisticated classroom discussions.

## Conclusions

Because our careers as scholars are often rooted in critical reading practices, we are not always conscious of our own interpretive moves and may collapse the various steps from text to interpretive application into a streamlined and ultimately habitual process. Thus, to develop analytical reading strategies for classroom source readings is not only to teach students how to unpack a text on a detailed level; it is also to reflect on and make explicit our own interpretive processes for the benefit of our students. The Method and related reading

techniques provide potential means of “decoding the discipline of music history” in a student-directed classroom.<sup>27</sup>

The hard work of observing textual details and oddities, arranging those details into categories and relationships, and questioning their meaning reveals that a text is doing something—thinking something of significance—through its structure. Rhetorical analysis strategies like The Method can help students realize that there is no such thing as a basic point but rather that a text gestures toward multiple kinds of meaning and makes multi-layered claims. We may need more than a two-page interview to fully explore the issues highlighted by Debussy, but such a text can indeed be a tool for igniting questions, grounding conversation, wrestling with ideas, and interpreting data—outcomes hindered by reading for the gist but enabled by the collective application of some basic rhetorical analysis strategies.

27. See J. Peter Burkholder, “Decoding the Discipline of Music History for Our Students,” this *Journal* 1, no. 2 (2011): 93–111, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/22/46>; and the Introduction to this roundtable.