Remaking the Canon in their Own Images:
Creative-Writing Projects in the Music History Classroom[1]

Alexander Stefaniak, Washington University in Saint Louis

Many students who take my courses on Western "classical" music come to the classroom aware of (and even espousing) a common assumption: that a music history course will teach them a single, authoritative, "right" way to hear and interpret musical works, one that stems primarily from the composer. This view is particularly prominent among my students who have had experience as performers of classical music. When discussing performance aesthetics, I ask how many have heard a private teacher or conductor enjoin them to respect the "composer's intentions"—virtually all who have studied piano, voice, or an orchestral instrument raise their hands. Moreover, those who come to class with prior music history or theory course-work are accustomed to analyzing works in order to explicate a composer's strategies. Of course, exploring a composer's decision-making and aesthetics can be highly rewarding in the classroom and in scholarship. At the same time, I also hope to instill a broader perspective in my students: I hope that they will appreciate how meaning can be shaped not just by composers' designs, but by performers' decisions and, perhaps most importantly, by the perspectives that listeners bring to a work.

In this essay, I explore two creative writing assignments that I have designed and implemented to help students cultivate this perspective. These assignments ask students to radically reinterpret canonic musical works, offering vivid, open-ended (and admittedly exaggerated) experiments that at once require close engagement with the "original" text and demonstrate how historical context and performer decisions can shape the manifold ways in which we experience and understand musical works. In the first, students develop programmatic narratives for the first movement of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, following in the footsteps of nineteenth-century music critics but steering clear of Napoleonic readings. In the second, students design alternative productions

of operas (specifically Mozart and Da Ponte's *Così fan tutte* and Bizet, Meilhac, and Halévy's *Carmen*), free to rework setting, characterization, and even plot in response to the original works' cultural politics (particularly their representations of gender and/or race). I developed these projects for three courses that do not require any previous musical experience and are open to both majors and non-majors at my institution: the "Eroica" project in a 100-level course on Beethoven, the *Così* project in a 100-level course on Mozart, and the *Carmen* project in a 300-level course on Romanticism. One could easily design comparable projects, though, for other works, repertoires, and kinds of courses. Depending on the size and format of the class, I have assigned creative writing as individual or small-group projects.

Such assignments might seem to digress from the kind of inquiry we most often pursue in music-history courses. As instructors, we rigorously situate music within specific historical and cultural contexts, and we model analytical and interpretive approaches bolstered by historically appropriate terminologies and methodologies. The assignments I am discussing here, by contrast, encourage freewheeling anachronism and highly individual responses. But I propose that creative reinterpretation assignments can contribute to some of our most important objectives as teachers of music history. They encourage students to embrace a multifaceted view of musical works, one that extends from the score to the stage and audience and that foregrounds both musical detail and broader cultural, aesthetic, political, and ethical issues. More broadly, these assignments can nudge students' growth as musicians and listeners who are empowered to think creatively, even opinionatedly, about their own engagement with music.

Creative Writing across the Disciplines

Music history and theory instructors often incorporate creative work into their courses. Model composition and recomposition are common in the classroom as well as in research.[2] My own symphonic and operatic assignments resemble projects about which other music history instructors have written and in which students produce prose rather than original music. Aaron Ziegel, for example, teaches program music through activities in which students articulate what they believe a programmatic work depicts or evaluate how vividly it conveys

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2. See, for example, Shersten Johnson, "Recomposition as Low-Stakes Analysis," *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy*, 2 (2014), http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/johnson.html; Matthew L. BaileyShea, "Filleted Mignon: A New Recipe for Analysis and Recomposition," *Music Theory Online* 13, no. 4 (2007), http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.07.13.4/mto.07.13.4.baileyshea.html; Stephen Rodgers, "Fanny Hensel's Lied Aesthetic," *Journal of Musicological Research* 30, no. 3 (2011): 190–92.

an image.[3] Kassandra L. Hartford, exploring the teaching of operas that depict sexual violence, describes an activity in which students imagine how they might stage a work "that raises thorny issues of contemporary relevance" and thereby "develop an interest in the work and its performance" while contending with "the ethical issues such operas raise."[4] She has used the assignment for operas that depict antisemitism, colonialism, or racism and argues that it would lend itself well to operas that depict sexual violence, such as *Don Giovanni* or *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Hartford writes that the project involves extensive score study and is most appropriate for upper-level music major courses—her recommendation implies that the assignment requires students to develop a staging that one could actually put into practice.

By comparison, the assignments I have developed give the students considerably more freedom and more fully inhabit the realm of creative writing (even revisionist fan fiction). The "Eroica" assignment asks students to develop original narratives rather than a plausible account of how Beethoven or his early nineteenth-century audiences heard the work. The operatic assignment allows students to defy the physical realities of singing and staging and to stretch the work beyond what most audiences would consider its breaking point. Both kinds of projects are accessible to students who cannot read a score (though an instructor could adapt them to require this skill).

Instructors in fields as varied as astronomy and art appreciation have shown how creative writing assignments further their discipline-specific pedagogical goals. In a study of creative writing in economics courses, for example, Ophelia D. Goma notes that professional economists routinely use narrative and metaphor when communicating with non-specialist audiences. Willis L. Kirkland observes that creative writing can defuse students' anxieties about a subject—biology, in his case.[5] More broadly, Goma and other instructors have pointed out that creative writing pushes students toward modes of inquiry that do not necessarily entail a quest for definitive, "right" answers.[6]

Instructors of history and English literature have described two benefits of creative writing that particularly reflect the multifaceted perspective that I

3. Aaron Ziegel, "Active Listening, Aural Imagination, and 19th-Century Program Music: An In-Class 'Experiment,'" *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy* 2 (2014), http://flip-camp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/ziegel.html.

4. Kassandra L. Hartford, "Beyond the Trigger Warning: Teaching Operas That Depict Sexual Violence," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 7, no. 1 (2016): 32.

5. Ophelia D. Goma, "Creative Writing in Economics," *College Teaching* 49, no. 4 (2001): 150; Willis L. Kirkland, "Teaching Biology Through Creative Writing: Integrating Abstract Biological Concepts into Narrative Contexts Makes Science Come Alive for Apprehensive Nonmajors," *Journal of College Science Teaching* 26, no. 4 (1997): 277.

6. Goma, "Creative Writing in Economics," 150; Art Young, Patricia Connor-Greene, Jerry Waldvogel, and Catherine Paul, "Poetry Across the Curriculum: Four Disciplinary Perspectives," *Language & Learning Across the Disciplines* 6, no. 2 (2003): 16.

hope my assignments nurture. First, creative writing can foster close reading and listening. Indeed, as Peter Parisi points out, the close reading required to write creatively based on preexistent literary texts sensitizes students to the range of ways in which authors can handle larger themes, "delineate[ing] the independent contours of both the assigned text and each student's exercise on the theme."[7] Second, these creative reinterpretation assignments require what Janine Larmon Peterson and Lea Graham describe as a "centrifugal" mode of reading and analysis.[8] Peterson and Graham metaphorically call assignments that challenge students to inhabit a historically distant place or literary genre while avoiding anachronism (a fictional memoir, or a medieval romance, for example) "centripetal," imagining a force that pulls students into a central historical context. By contrast, just as centrifugal force pushes one away from a spinning center, Peterson and Graham's centrifugal assignments require students to begin with a text or context but engage in cross-historical translation and comparison: updating Voltaire's *Candide* to satirize twenty-first-century society, for example. These assignments, Peterson and Graham argue, ask students to "discover points of reference in which the concerns or values of the past resonate with those of the present" and to "illuminate dissonances between specific manifestations of [enduring cultural] paradigms."[9] By reinterpreting symphonies and operas, students measure the cultural distance between their world and Mozart's, Beethoven's, or Bizet's while considering how this music speaks to them as twenty-first century listeners.

With these interrelated benefits in mind, I have designed my creative reinterpretation assignments with the following objectives in mind. The students will:

- Produce and share creative writing that reflects a detailed understanding of the work in question.
- Respond to course content that explores style, structure, and historical context.
- Illustrate how details of the original work have significant implications for the way we understand its larger narrative and message.
- Demonstrate the contingency of musical meaning (e.g., how audiences engage with musical works through their own listening habits, tastes, and cultural filters, and how performers can make decisions that have significant implications for the meanings a work can convey).
- Recognize themselves as creatively empowered, (re)interpretive performers and listeners in their own right.

7. Peter Parisi, "Close Reading, Creative Writing, and Cognitive Development," *College English* 41, no. 1 (1979): 62.

8. Janine Larmon Peterson and Lea Graham, "Teaching Historical Analysis through Creative Writing Assignments," *College Teaching* 63, no. 4 (2015): 154.

9. Peterson and Graham, "Teaching Historical Analysis," 153, 156.

From "Beethoven's Hero" to Undergraduates' Heroes

The creative writing projects that I have developed build upon class sessions that delve into the music and its historical context. Our "Eroica" project follows a session that explores two topics crucial to the symphony and its reception. First, we discuss six important junctures or structural features of the first movement, working to articulate how they convey tension or resolution:

1. The opening several measures which combine bold, "heroic" gestures with adumbrations of suspense and tension: the powerful initial chords, the triadic primary theme's surprising descent to C-sharp, and, in m. 18, the move to F minor, for example.
2. The start of the development, and the development's extraordinary length in comparison with the other sections of the sonata form.
3. The buildup of harmonically and metrically dissonant chords in mm. 248–280 and the lyrical, seemingly new theme that emerges in their wake.
4. The horn's seemingly premature intimation of the opening motive at m. 394, immediately before the recapitulation.
5. Measure 408, in which the horn presents a new version of the primary theme that ends on a high, sustained note.
6. The peroration coda.[10]

Second, I introduce students to Beethoven's planned but retracted dedication to Napoleon Bonaparte and survey the long critical and scholarly tradition of spinning heroic, in some cases Napoleonic, narratives that hinged upon several of these key passages and features. This aspect of my presentation draws upon scholarship by Scott Burnham and Thomas Sipe, both of whom have analyzed nineteenth- and early twentieth-century programmatic readings of the symphony.[11] My goal, then, is for students to approach the creative assign-

10. My choices are indebted to Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), and J. Peter Burkholder's discussion of the "Eroica" in his edition of the textbook *A History of Western Music*. Burkholder, in fact, continues the tradition of giving the "Eroica" a narrative reading, encouraging readers to hear a "story of challenge, struggle, and victory" in the first movement, including "protagonist" and "antagonist" themes. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 9th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 570–73; J. Peter Burkholder and Claude Palisca, eds., *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, 6th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010) 2:315–16.

Although Burnham and Burkholder address readers with considerable prior music study, I have found that students without such background readily hear and grasp these six junctures or features. Introduced previously to syncopation, for example, they perceive it throughout the movement—particularly when trying to clap or move to the beat. They also they have no difficulty hearing recurrences of the primary theme in the development and coda.

11. Burnham, *Beethoven Hero*, for example, 3–28; Thomas Sipe, "Interpreting Beethoven: History, Aesthetics, and Critical Reception" (PhD. diss, University of Pennsylvania, 1992) and

ment not as blank slates, but with a shared awareness of the first movement's structure and the symphony's reception history.

The students' assignment for the next class session is to develop their own programmatic narratives. Their options are completely open: they may choose any real or fictional setting other than Napoleonic warfare. Their narratives should incorporate all six key moments we discussed in class, though they are welcome to add more. I ask students to make clear how their narratives line up with the music. Some opt to explain the connection in prose—"At the start of the development, X happens"—or through parenthetical references to timings. Students thereby engage not only in a mode of writing typical of nineteenth-century music critics but also in a mode of music analysis. Burnham, urging readers to take the programmatic readings he explores seriously as objects of scholarly inquiry, points out that their writers were capable of describing the "Eroica" first movement "in terms of form, thematic structure, and harmony" but that they chose to use programmatic narrative as an "analytical metalanguage" to describe the movement's thematic development. Critics, he argues, turned to "anthropomorphic metaphor" in order to capture aspects of the symphony that appealed vividly to their imaginations.[12] Although some critics and scholars have presented particular narrative readings of the symphony as authoritative, I stress to my students that we should read these narratives not to discover what Beethoven "really" meant, but to appreciate how writers made sense of this music. I point out, too, the long tradition of narrative or imagistic descriptions that stem from listeners, performers, or publishers rather than composers: Hans von Bülow's descriptions of Chopin's preludes, for example, the "Moonlight" title of Beethoven's Sonata quasi una fantasia, Op. 27, no. 2, and listeners' experiments with putting descriptive headings and lyrics to Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*. For my students, as for their historical forebears, writing programmatic narratives gives them a language for articulating how individual moments and the larger arc of the movement stimulate their imaginations.

The prompt explicitly advises students that they should be prepared to share their work and that our objective will be to understand how programmatic narratives for this movement converge and diverge—both within our class and in comparison to selected nineteenth-century narratives that I summarize. Burnham and Sipe cite numerous programmatic descriptions of the first movement and the symphony as a whole, most of which are available in English translation. I often choose to include examples by A. B. Marx and Richard

Beethoven: Eroica Symphony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 54–67, and 94–116 (in which Sipe himself argues for reading the symphony as grounded in Homer and Schiller).

    12. Burnham, *Beethoven Hero*, 8.

Wagner. Wagner's is shorter than many other nineteenth-century "Eroica" programs and discusses few specific passages, but his and Marx's make an illustrative pairing in that they contrast clearly and revealingly. Marx describes a clash of armies and refers to Napoleon, whereas Wagner explicitly argues against viewing the symphony as a series of historic or military episodes and instead offers a psychological reading.[13]

As Aaron Ziegel does in his program music activities, I frame the projects and our follow-up discussion as an "experiment."[14] The term communicates to students that our discussion will provide not only an enjoyable chance to admire one another's work but also an occasion to draw larger conclusions from our different programmatic narratives. Students share their work in small groups, and each group nominates one person to share with the entire class. This practice gives all students the chance to share with at least some classmates and maximizes the number of approaches each student encounters. I summarize their narratives (as well as Marx's and Wagner's) in a spreadsheet projected onto the screen, which can be saved and distributed to the class. Having laid an array of contrasting reinterpretations side by side, I pose such questions as "Have any of your classmates made similar decisions?" "Do any of your classmates seem to have radically different approaches to the music or drama?" and "What do you feel you've learned from reading these narratives?"

I have found that two practices cultivate productive discussions of creative writing. First, as with any class discussion, I prepare questions (of varying degrees of open-endedness) ahead of time to guide the discussion toward particular points, and I also create questions on the spot in response to the often unpredictable student creative work. Second, I strive to follow, when introducing the assignment and in the follow-up discussion, Parisi's recommendation that instructors model an "appreciative, positive, and…uncritical reception of student [creative] writing."[15] My experience bears out Parisi's point that this attitude encourages students to take one another's work seriously, as well as Art Young and his coauthors' observation that students who feel safe sharing their creative work are more likely to express fresh perspectives.[16] (Indeed, I

13. For English translations see "*Ludwig van Beethoven: Life and Works*: Selected Excerpts," in A. B. Marx, *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven: Selected Writings on Theory and Method*, ed. and trans. Scott Burnham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158–74 and "Beethoven's 'Heroic Symphony,'" in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Boude Brothers, 1966; reprint, London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1894) 3:221–24. For the German texts, see A. B. Marx, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Leben und Schaffen*, 3rd ed., ed. Gustav Behncke (Berlin: Otto Janke, 1875), 245–57; Richard Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe in zehn Bänden*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer (Frankfurt: Insel, 1983) 9:29–30.

14. Ziegel, "Active Listening."

15. Parisi uses "uncritical" in the sense of being non-judgmental. "Close Reading," 66.

16. Parisi, "Close Reading," 66; Young et. al, "Poetry Across the Curriculum," 40.

have observed that many students choose to make themselves vulnerable to some extent in their creative writing for my courses by sharing their interests, tastes in books and movies, and cultural backgrounds.) I take pains to treat students' creative reinterpretations as insightful commentary. For example, I might preface a question by volunteering, "This 'Eroica' program is quirky, but I think the author is also offering a really interesting way of hearing the development." Or, when discussing opera reinterpretations, I might add in response to a student comment, "What I think you're saying is that this group developed a very different way of representing class in *Carmen*." Such rhetoric is by no means patronizing or disingenuous; indeed, students often surprise me and one another with the originality and thoughtfulness of their work.

When I ask students to consider how their "Eroica" programs differ from one another, their first observations are often that our chart includes widely contrasting concepts of heroism. Every time I have assigned this project, at least one or two students write sports narratives. One, for example, invented fictional football teams for a titanic Super Bowl, while another fit the movement to a real event in Olympic swimming: a victory by the US men's relay team. Students who do write about war or combat most often turn not to real wars but to fantasy settings, comic book superheroes, and plots redolent of action-adventure films. [17] One student wrote a narrative about playing a video game called *Eroica*. Other students shy away from epic struggle and interpret "heroism" more loosely. One, for example, wrote about two friends struggling to maintain their friendship in the face of interpersonal conflict, while another wrote about a protagonist contending with social anxiety.

Mapping this range of conceits leads us far afield of the real historical contexts and primary sources most germane to a music history course. But it supports an objective central to my course and indeed to many Beethoven scholars: understanding how generations of musicians and audiences have reinterpreted Beethoven's music and image to represent manifold cultural and political meanings.[18] Generating and comparing narratives vividly illustrates for my students that listeners—both contemporaneous and across historical distances—refract the music they hear through own cultural preoccupations and fields of

17. Here and elsewhere in this article, I have refrained from quoting directly from any student work or providing any identifying information (including gendered pronouns).

18. Burnham opens his discussion of "Beethoven's Hero" by acknowledging that writers have related this "myth" in numerous ways. *Beethoven Hero*, 3. The scholarly literature on Beethoven's changing image and cultural meaning is substantial. To cite but four examples: Michael Broyles, *Beethoven in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Esteban Buch, *Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History*, trans. Richard Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Alessandra Comini, *The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); Alexander Rehding, *Beethoven's Symphony no. 9* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

experience, even when they share some basic assumptions about what a work of music represents or which moments are particularly noteworthy. They find that all of the "Eroica" narratives, contemporary as well as historical, reflect radically different views of what constitutes heroism, and different assumptions about whose struggles are worthy of portrayal in such monumental music. Nineteenth-century audiences were fascinated with Napoleon's rise to power, and Sipe has argued for reading the "Eroica" in light of Beethoven's familiarity with Homeric epics.[19] By contrast, my students' most familiar scripts for heroic deeds and adventures did not exist as we know them in Beethoven's time—professional sports, superhero comics and movies, or video gaming, for example. One of my students gave the first movement a particularly contemporary spin that subverted a tradition of straightforwardly triumphal "Eroica" narratives. Taking a cue from the gritty antiheroes who populate the film and television their classmates consume, the student revealed at the end of their essay that their courageous, determined protagonist would be better described as a villain than as a hero. My student concluded by pointing out that many villains are heroes in their own minds. When Beethoven invites twenty-first century undergraduates to imagine "heroism"—or, perhaps better said, when an instructor explicitly asks them to think creatively and intently about heroism while engaging with the music and without attempting to situate themselves in Beethoven's world—the stories and images that come to their minds differ substantially from those of nineteenth-century listeners. Their creative writing articulates their historical and cultural difference from the "Eroica," even as it emerges from close, engaged listening.

Comparing programmatic narratives also illustrates for students that the structure of the "Eroica" first movement (and, by extension, other works of music) admits subtly different hearings and analyses. Writing a narrative requires students to express, for example, when and to what extent they feel a sense of closure, and how particular moments satisfy or defy their expectations. My students frequently present differing views about when they feel the movement's tension resolving. Some identify the horn's version of the main theme at m. 408 as the decisive moment of closure that the coda extravagantly confirms. The student who wrote of the fictional Super Bowl, for example, identified m. 408 as a field goal that sealed the team's victory, the recapitulation as the clock running down, and the coda as the award ceremony and press conference. (This narrative, I pointed out, shared some features with one by nineteenth-century writer Wilhelm von Lenz, who described the entire recapitulation as the hero's posthumous renown.[20]) Other students, by contrast, identify the recapitulation as a glimmer of hope but consider the coda as the moment when struggle truly

19. Sipe, *Beethoven*: *Eroica Symphony*, 76–96.
20. Burnham, *Beethoven Hero*, 18.

becomes victory. The student who wrote about Olympic swimming, for example, had one of the U. S. swimmers pull ahead at the beginning of the recapitulation and only win the gold medal in the coda. Although both of these students had only been aware of sonata form for a matter of weeks, they used narrative and metaphor to offer subtly contrasting readings of the movement's form. In different ways, they made decisions about how to weigh the recapitulation and coda as significant moments of arrival, and how much tension and suspense to hear in the recapitulation's harmonic and metric dissonances.

More broadly, our follow-up discussions reveal students taking conceptually different approaches to the music. For example, while some describe a protagonist defeating an external adversary, others imagine a wholly internal drama. The student who shared a narrative about a protagonist's experience with social anxiety compared the movement's harmonic and metric dissonances to the character's feelings of dread. In their account, the development's buildup of dissonant chords represented a particularly intense anxiety attack that pushes the protagonist to seek help. The subsequent "new" theme and the passages that followed (in which the primary theme seems to reassert itself and build to the retransition) represented a montage of therapy. With the horn call at m. 394, the protagonist remembered that they could enter familiar situations—the recapitulation—with new skills. Other students imagined that the movement culminated not with the defeat of an adversary, but with reconciliation and harmony. The student who wrote about two friends settling an argument, for example, imagined the coda as a renewal of friendship. Identifying these differences does not relate to historical or analytical topics as closely as do other aspects of our discussion. Even so, it invites students to ask important, even fundamental, questions about their listening experiences: for example, whether they hear the symphony's intense dissonances as adrenaline boosting or painful, whether they found it more engaging to imagine a drama with discrete characters or a flow of individual emotions, or whether the coda suggested to them a return to wholeness and harmony or the feeling of vanquishing a rival.

Of course, listeners who encounter the "Eroica" and other instrumental works (evocative titles or not) need not develop such detailed, original programmatic narratives. Listeners are free to imagine narratives in vague, general terms, or to embrace the symphony's Napoleonic resonance. Other listeners might find that programs or extra-musical images are peripheral or irrelevant to their enjoyment of the varied orchestral colors, intense dissonances, and memorable themes. My assignment creates an admittedly artificial situation and requires students to play along. Even so, it asks students to think and write about important aspects of the piece, from its overall structure to the cultural resonance of its "heroic" title. The assignment invites them to broaden our discussion beyond what the "Eroica" meant for Beethoven and

his nineteenth-century audiences and to consider what it might mean for them as twenty-first-century listeners (albeit listeners equipped with a detailed understanding of the first movement's form and Beethoven's context). My students' work on this assignment bears out an insight about creative writing that Richard Gebhardt and Parisi share: in these writings and discussions, students often articulate sophisticated, subtle, critical insights.[21] By developing personal, creative responses within the framework of our earlier historical and analytical discussion, students solidify a detailed understanding of Beethoven's score and become aware of how this music passes through listeners' cultural and conceptual filters.

Revising Canonic Operas

Like the "Eroica" assignment, my operatic reinterpretation projects build upon class sessions that explore text and context. In my Mozart course, students encounter *Così fan tutte* around mid-semester, by which point they are familiar with the conventions of opera buffa and have explored characterization and cultural meaning in other works; in the Romanticism course, *Carmen* forms the centerpiece of a series of sessions on exoticism. Whereas the "Eroica" assignment asks students to become nineteenth-century music critics with twenty-first-century perspectives, the opera assignments ask them to step into a different tradition: directors who radically reinterpret canonic operas, often in ways that resonate with contemporary issues. In preparation for the experiment, I introduce students to examples: for Mozart, Peter Sellars's productions and, more recently, LA Opera's *¡Figaro! (90210)* (which presents the iconic barber as an undocumented immigrant and includes a completely rewritten libretto); and, for *Carmen*, the reinterpreted productions that Susan McClary describes in her study of the opera, film versions such as *Carmen Jones* and *Carmen: A Hip Hopera*, and Dmitri Tcherniakov's production of *Carmen* for the Aix Festival (which frames the entire plot as a role-playing exercise within a male protagonist's psychotherapy session).[22]

21. Richard C. Gebhardt, "Fiction Writing in Literature Classes," *Rhetoric Review* 7, no. 1 (1988): 154; Parisi, "Close Reading," 62.

22. Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet,* Carmen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 123–25, 131–46; *¡Figaro! (90210)* https://www.laopera.org/season/1415-Season-at-a-Glance/Figaro90210/; Micaela Baranello, "Review: 'Carmen', Boldly Rewritten as Therapy for a Modern Man, *New York Times* (July 5, 2017 (https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/arts/music/review-carmen-boldly-rewritten-as-therapy-for-a-modern-man.html. For recent studies of *Carmen Jones*, see Melinda Boyd, "The Politics of Color in Oscar Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones*," in *Blackness in Opera*, ed. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 212–35 and Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power,*

Given these extravagant models, my students receive even greater power to reshape the operas, with no regard for budget or practicality. For their creative retellings, students must retain the characters and avoid omitting music. But they must find a setting other than nineteenth-century Spain for *Carmen* or eighteenth-century Italy for *Così*. "The whole of time and space," the prompt reads, "is your oyster." Changing the setting means changing the identities of characters (their class statuses and occupations, for example), and students are even welcome to change characters' genders and ages. (Indeed, many of my students' creative retellings are not producible in any realistic sense. Bizet's exotic "Spanish" music, for example, would seem incongruous in many of the settings they choose. Many of my students also defy the practicalities of operatic performance. For example, some switch the genders in *Così* so that two women deceive their boyfriends, a change that would likely require some radical transpositions of music.) Even though the music remains largely intact, students are free to change what characters say or do in particular arias or ensembles, even to alter important aspects of the plot.

I ask students not only to describe their productions in terms of setting, character, and plot but also to focus on designated arias or ensembles. In *Carmen*, students describe how the Act I Seguidilla unfolds in their versions: what is Carmen trying to persuade Don Jose to do, and how does she enlist his aid? (Carmen might be under arrest and attempting to escape, as in the original, or she might be in a different kind of trouble.) Students need not write new libretti to fit Bizet's melodies, but they do need to describe the substance of the conversation throughout the duet. In *Così*, students focus on two numbers. First, they describe their versions of the Act I sextet, in which Ferrando and Guglielmo burst in wearing "Albanian" attire. In their alternative productions, I ask, "How have the men disguised themselves and attempted to captivate Fiordiligi and Dorabella?" (Students may attempt to make the disguises plausible or embrace the silliness of the original.) Second, in Ferrando and Fiordiligi's Act II duet, "How does Fiordiligi plan to flee the situation? Where does she believe she will rejoin Guglielmo?" And, "How does Ferrando persuade (or, more accurately, emotionally blackmail) her to remain with him?"

Through their creative writing and the follow-up discussion, students present what amounts to sensitive analyses of the original work. The *Carmen* and *Così* experiments ask students to consider how details of characterization, plot, and operatic convention carry weight and to recognize the different historical and cultural filters through which they, their classmates, and early audiences viewed these operas. Most importantly, the operatic assignments ask students to engage with the original works' representations of gender and/

Engagement (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 120–66, which also explores *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* and a South African version, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*.

or race—representations they often find dated at best and noxious at worst—while leaving open how exactly they might do so. I want to stress that I am not claiming that any of my students' productions perfectly "redeem" these operas, creating representations of race or gender that are beyond critique. (Nor am I necessary insisting to my students that, if these operas are to be performed, they must be radically altered.[23]) My aim is not to produce perfect operas but for students to recognize that the subtle and sweeping decisions of (re)composers, librettists, directors, and performers have real implications for an opera's broader message and cultural politics.

As we build toward the creative projects, I assign readings that highlight issues of race and/or gender. While watching and discussing *Così*, students read excerpts from Kristi Brown-Montesano's book on Mozart's female characters, in which she analyzes Don Alfonso's misogynistic pedagogy. In keeping with a Rousseauist, male-centered concept of education, Don Alfonso uses experience and reason to teach Guglielmo and Ferrando but assumes that women are governed by their passions and incapable of reason. While the "school for lovers" teaches the men to understand the supposed nature of women, it only manipulates Dorabella and Fiordiligi into substantiating Don Alfonso's stereotypes. They learn, Brown-Montesano writes, "humiliation, shame, and doubt of their own feelings, judgments, and friends."[24]

The prompt for the *Così* project explicitly asks students to respond to this reading. In an earlier class session on Act II, I point out that some productions end with the mismatched lovers together, not the original pairings, perhaps on the grounds that Guglielmo/Dorabella and Ferrando/Fiordiligi seem better matched given their behavior during the opera, or that the original pairings would seem incongruous after a tale of deception and infidelity. Several of my students go even farther in expressing discomfort or incredulity with a return to the original pairings: they reject any kind of *lieto fine* in which characters remain coupled. Even upon hearing a short summary of the plot, many students readily recognize that the women have more than ample grounds for dumping their boyfriends—some look visibly shocked when I explain that Guglielmo and Ferrando readily agree to a bet involving outright lying and cruel emotional manipulation. Especially after reading Brown-Montesano's work, many show in their projects that they cannot imagine the women reuniting with the men

23. I strive to take an approach that Hartford describes: exploring the troubling issues that these works raise, while also "leav[ing] room for students to enjoy opera," allowing them "to engage with difficult operas—even to love them—without becoming apologists" for the way they present violence, gender, race, and other issues. Hartford, "Beyond the Trigger Warning," 29.

24. Kristi Brown-Montesano, *Understanding the Women of Mozart's Operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 257–58. Brown-Montesano argues against a commonly held view that *Così* presents a message of reconciliation.

as a happy or even believable ending. These students end *Così* with the women publicly (and scathingly) breaking up with the men—the curtain falls on two female friends liberated from dysfunctional relationships, and two newly single (and perhaps chastened) men. As I prod students to recognize in the class discussion, such choices vividly illustrate their distance from the conventions of opera buffa. Whereas Mozart and his audiences regarded the *lieto fine* as an essential fixture of the genre, my twenty-first-century undergraduates find that, in this case, the convention stretches their senses of justice and plausibility too far.

Other aspects of my students' historical reinterpretations shed light on how the "original" *Così* conveys a message about gender and, at the same time, say just as much about the social and historical perspectives from which they approach this opera. For example, several students converted *Così* into a college or high-school drama. Whereas high schools and college campuses do not figure in eighteenth-century opera, dramas and comedies set in these locations saturate my students' media landscapes and inform their views about dating and relationships. One student volunteered that their high-school setting not only made characters' immaturity seem more believable; it also changed what they considered one of the opera's more troubling aspects. As this student pointed out, the original marriage ending shackled the women to men who had deceived and humiliated them. Instead, my student's high-school drama turned the opera into a painful adolescent learning experience that would inform the characters' future relationships. In their reinterpretations of the Act I sextet, several of my students have suggested a different way in which *Così* resonates with their contemporary worlds: they have the men's disguises begin (or exist wholly) online through false social media profiles. On the one hand, these productions attempt to make the opera more verisimilar, concocting disguises that are at least initially plausible. On the other hand, they also suggest one way in which the opera's themes of deception and surveillance—not to mention bad behavior facilitated through disguise—speak to students' digitally mediated lives. Like "Eroica" narratives about professional sports, these productions illustrate for my students how they bring their own cultural frameworks to the opera, frameworks that differ from those its creators and early audiences.

Reworking *Carmen* requires students to grapple creatively not only with gender but also with intersecting issues of class and race. Students read writings on the opera by Susan McClary and Ralph Locke that not only explore Bizet's borrowings from and evocations of popular Spanish music, but also analyze how stereotypes about the Roma—often misleadingly and offensively referred to as "Gypsies"—informed Carmen's character, particularly her criminality, promiscuity, and defiance of authority. They also read a chapter from Jonathan Bellman's monograph on the *style hongrois*, which provides an account of these

stereotypes and their historical context that many students find eye-opening.[25] In addition, by this point in the course, students have encountered a narrative trope common in nineteenth-century opera, in which the main female character asserts independence but ultimately suffers and dies to provide the opera's musical and emotional climax.

As with the *Così* project, the *Carmen* prompt open-endedly asks students to respond to these readings. One of the most striking patterns I have noticed in their projects is that many avoid making Carmen a member of an oppressed minority, or indeed explicitly assigning her a racial or ethnic identity. This pattern could represent a deliberate response to how the opera others and stereotypes Carmen or, perhaps, students' discomfort with representing race in creative work that they will share with the class. One group, for example, set the opera on Wall Street, with Carmen part of a ring of insider traders and Don Jose a lawman investigating them. (In their version of the Seguidilla, Carmen turns the tables on Don Jose's interrogation by promising him a life of hedonistic luxury.) The students clarified that they wanted to keep Carmen within a criminal element but without using a trope rooted in racist stereotypes. In their view, they avoided this pitfall by invoking a different character type: the white-collar criminal who uses wealth and privilege as a shield. Many of my students also reacted to a different aspect of the opera, one rooted in its stereotyping of Carmen. They showed in their productions that they found Carmen's fatalistic acceptance of her own death an incomprehensible choice for a resourceful character so fiercely committed to her own freedom and survival. I remind them during our discussion that, as Locke shows in an analysis of the Act III "Card Aria," Carmen's fatalism reflects a stereotype of "Gypsies" as superstitious and irrational.[26] Several students concocted endings in which Carmen acts on warnings about the danger she is in and ultimately defends

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25. Because many Roma consider the word "Gypsy" a slur, I use the word sparingly in this essay. When I do, it is to refer to often defamatory stereotypes constructed in literature, music, and cultural products, not the actual Roma people. My admittedly imperfect approach is indebted to Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Reflections and Images* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 137.

For our class sessions on *Carmen*, I assign students McClary, *Georges Bizet,* Carmen, 51–58; 62–110; Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 154–56, 160–69; and Jonathan Bellman, *The* style hongrois *in the Music of Western Europe* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 69–92. Of course, the scholarly literature on exoticism in *Carmen* and its reinterpretations is substantial, and my aim here is not to survey or summarize it. For two recent examples that consider different issues, see Ralph Locke, "Spanish Local Color in Bizet's *Carmen*: Unexplored Borrowings and Transformations," in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830–1914*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 316–60, and Samuel Llano, *Whose Spain? Negotiating "Spanish Music" in Paris, 1908–1929* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 161–91.

26. Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 172–74.

herself, instead leaving Don Jose's corpse on the stage. One group, for example, set the opera in Prohibition-era Chicago and turned the smugglers into bootleggers: their Carmen shot Don Jose during the final scene.[27]

Students' *Carmen* productions also articulate a stark gap between the way they understand the opera's characters and the way its early audiences did. In a previous class session on Act IV, I ask students to identify the opera's tragic victim or victims. They unanimously include Carmen. And no wonder, given that Don Jose perfectly embodies a figure all-too familiar to them: the possessive male who stalks, assaults, and even murders his former partner. My students are often shocked to then read early reviews of the opera that describe Carmen as a threatening or repulsive character who bears the blame for corrupting Don Jose and whose death is satisfying, even deserved—indeed, McClary notes, the "traditionally dominant reading" of the opera casts "Carmen as *femme fatale,* Don Jose as victim."[28] My students' *Carmen* reinterpretations suggest that they respond differently to these characters (guided, perhaps, by our readings). They readily name Don Jose as possessive or as a murderer. Through their wording, rhetoric, and tone of voice when reading, many students make clear that they find Don Jose a contemptible character and do not believe that Carmen's death represents justice served. Rather, they explicitly or implicitly recognize her as a tragic victim (or, for those who allow her to survive, a potential victim).

My students' revisionist productions of *Così* and *Carmen* open a mode of discussion within which they feel empowered to critique, or at least express deeply held opinions about, canonic musical works. Although I have yet to systematically study how a student's awareness of canonicity affects their critical stance, some of my students reveal at the beginning of the semester that "classical" music has been part of their educations since early childhood. And, in most classes, I have one or two students whose essays uncritically allude to Mozart or Beethoven as a "great composer" or "genius." Such students, I believe, might find critiquing canonic repertoire sacrilegious—or, at least, contrary to an ideology that sees performing this music as a valuable educational achievement.[29] Students who approach "classical" music as newcomers might feel their own inhibitions about forming opinions: for them, operas and symphonies are

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27. If these students' visions of organized crime during the Prohibition Era drew upon popular representations, they might well have imagined Carmen occupying a particular class or ethnic category. Even so, their project made no mention of it, focusing instead on tailoring the plot and characters to the new milieu and setting up Carmen to survive.

28. McClary, *Georges Bizet,* Carmen, 111–13, 119–20, 125.

29. For one essay on how notions of a composer's or works' greatness or "genius" can disempower listeners—those who do not see their gender or ethnicity represented in the canon, and those who do not believe that they know "enough" about music—see Sara Haefeli, "The Problem with Geniuses," *The Avid Listener,* https://www.theavidlistener.com/2015/04/the-problem-with-geniuses.html.

initially strange, unfamiliar forms of entertainment. Writing creatively about this music, however, pushes students beyond a mode of discussion that centers on right and wrong answers, or appropriate or inappropriate methodologies, giving them a path of less resistance toward engaging personally and insightfully with the works at hand. Rather than approaching the composer as an authority to be grasped on his own terms, creative writing gives the students a chance to assume authority by freely reinterpreting and altering.

Indeed, some of my students present their creative projects as explicit or implicit critiques of the cultural politics of *Così* and *Carmen*, whether with humor or in deadly earnest. One example of the former is a student who wrote a gender-swapped *Così*, presented as a reality show in which the women seduce one another's boyfriends. Their version offered multiple levels of wry, insightful commentary. The setting translated the opera to a present-day genre in which audiences expect interpersonal intrigue and contrived dramatic scenarios. At the same time, the student gleefully turned the tables on Don Alfonso's stereotyping of the opera's women, presenting the men as easily duped and in thrall to their desires. Although my student stopped short of openly criticizing Mozart and Da Ponte, they do suggest that the composer and librettist could have just as easily produced an opera called *Thus do all Men*. One of my students struck a more serious tone when reinterpreting *Carmen*, which they based on the 2012 David Petraeus scandal. The student pointed out that some press discourse about the scandal had fixated on the clothing and physical appearance of Paula Broadwell, the female biographer with whom the general had had an affair and shared classified information—some accounts had portrayed Broadwell as a temptress whom Petraeus had been powerless to resist.[30] My student identified *Carmen* (or, at least, the reactions of its early audiences) as part of a larger practice of scapegoating women for men's bad behavior. Of course, my students might well have made similar points within more conventional discussions or essays. But a creative-writing project provides a moderated forum that allows both seriousness and irreverence and, by its nature, invites personal responses.

Assessing Creative Projects

Grading creative projects, of course, differs in many ways from grading more conventional assignments. In the former, one does not necessarily expect a thesis-driven structure or footnotes, for example, and would likely welcome language that might seem too colloquial in a formal research paper. Instructors who have written about creative writing across the disciplines often recommend

30. For one critique of this way of reporting on the scandal, see Frank Bruni, "The Siren and the Spook," *New York Times* (Nov. 12, 2012). https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/opinion/bruni-the-siren-and-the-spook.html?_r=0.

making these assignments low-stakes, generously graded parts of the course. Not only is formal instruction in creative writing usually beyond the scope of our courses, but, in these assignments, "literary merit" is often less important than engagement with the material. [31] My own approach has been to advise students that, to receive an "A" on the project, they should engage with details of the work highlighted in the prompt, clearly respond to our previous class discussion and reading, use well-edited prose, and be ready to share if called upon.

My assessment of other aspects of the courses suggests, that creative writing assignments deepen and solidify students' engagement with the course material. For example, students in the Beethoven and Mozart courses tend to write particularly strong, detailed answers to exam questions about the "Eroica" and *Così*, respectively. Writing creative essays on these topics, I believe, encourages them to read and listen closely, and it shores up their grasp of what we had covered in previous class sessions.

I also find that these assignments engage my students in ways that numerical grades to not easily capture. The vast majority of my students invest enthusiastically in these assignments. Our follow-up discussions are often lively, with no shortage of students willing to participate. Students readily grasp the larger lesson about the importance of listeners and performers. I have also observed that sharing creative writing enriches the classroom community and leads to more varied participation. These projects invite students to take on roles different than those they might usually fill in class, and to leverage personal and intellectual characteristics different than those they display in more conventional assignments. Students who usually seem concerned about always getting "right" answers, for example, sometimes reveal subversive, playful senses of humor. Or, students who generally present themselves as reserved or laconic sometimes share expansive, richly detailed stories.

Adaptation and Implications for the Broader Curriculum

Instructors can easily adapt these creative writing assignments for variety of repertoire and courses. My decision to use the "Eroica," *Così fan tutte*, and *Carmen* was based on the needs of the course at hand, not the belief that these works were better suited for creative reinterpretation than others. The Beethoven course, for example, explores the "Eroica" early in the semester as an introduction to the composer's symphonies. The creative project not only requires students to immerse themselves in the first movement, it also aims to encourage students to listen observantly and talk about their perceptions—practices that I hope

31. For example, Young et al., "Poetry Across the Curriculum," 15; Kirkland, "Teaching Biology Through Creative Writing," 26; Peterson and Graham, "Teaching Historical Analysis," 157.

they bring to other music we explore. The "Eroica" is in some ways ideal for a creative reinterpretation assignment. It does not include obvious portrayals of extra-musical phenomena. (By contrast, students might be hard-pressed to find alternative interpretations for the bird-calls and thunderclaps in the "Pastoral" Symphony.) The "Eroica," too, already comes with an extensive tradition of varied narrative readings into which students can step. But other instrumental works also lend themselves well to writing original, anachronistic narratives. Students could imagine Liszt's symphonic poem *Prometheus* representing the struggles and achievements of a different creator or discoverer, or Robert Schumann's *Carnaval* representing scenes from a twenty-first century costume party. (The latter offers particularly complex options: *Carnaval* includes some movements whose titles refer to characters, and others that refer to actions one might take at a ball. The assignment could challenge students to articulate how the motives and figurational patterns that define each movement evoke moods or images and, at a larger level, to make sense of the digressive, fragmentary aspects of the cycle.) The operatic canon offers any number of works that would allow students to creatively and critically engage with representations of race, gender, and other kinds of identity.

Although I initially designed these creative writing projects to enrich students' engagement with particular works, I believe that they can also play a part in nudging and enticing them along longer intellectual journeys, within both their musical and wider educations. Most broadly, creative reinterpretation activities foster skills and perspectives that Amanda Hiner has identified as essential to the literary analysis central to the humanities and the critical thinking prized across the disciplines. Hiner argues that teachers of literary analysis serve not only their discipline-specific pedagogical goals but also help students grow into critical thinkers. Literary analysis, for example, requires us to recognize multiple layers of meaning, to interrelate details and larger structures, to revise our readings in response to others', and to consider how readers' cultural filters shape their engagement with texts. Creative reinterpretations and follow-up discussions require such analysis, asking students to weigh the implications of musical and dramatic details and to consider musical works from multiple cultural, aesthetic, and political perspectives. Such skills, Hiner points out, support widely recognized criteria of critical thinking: the ability to understand and assess multiple viewpoints, for example, and to contend with intricate, multifaceted problems.[32]

32. Amanda Hiner, "Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom, Part I: Making Critical Thinking Visible," *INQUIRY: Critical Thinking across the Disciplines* 28, no. 1 (2013): 27–28; 30–31. Hiner's discussion of critical thinking draws upon Gerald Nosich, *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2012), and Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *Critical Thinking: Tools*

I also propose that creative writing about canonic musical works can help build two perspectives that we often seek to cultivate in music studies specifi- cally. First, these assignments offer one way of making the course's analytical and historical discussions meaningful. Students imagine how they might nar- rate the "Eroica" informed by our discussion of the first movement's structure, genesis, and reception, or how they might rework *Carmen* and *Così fan tutte* given what they have learned about these operas' representations of race and gender from McClary, Locke, and Bellman, or from Brown-Montesano. Even as this creative writing calls for open-ended, personal responses, it also facil- itates a dialogue between the student as an imaginative listener or performer and as a scholar in the music history classroom—and, I hope, it encourages students to keep considering how the study of music history can enrich their own music-making and listening.

Second, at the end of each follow-up discussion, I urge students to take from their work a widened understanding of how performers and listeners have the power to shape and even transform musical works. Admittedly, our creative writing experiments create exaggerated, contrived situations. Not all of us weave programs as we listen to instrumental music, and musicians and directors involved in opera productions do not usually receive the creative free- dom my assignments permit. But I close our class discussions by invoking the last of my learning objectives: I suggest to my students that, when they perform or listen to music, they are constantly making decisions and inhabiting per- spectives that shape what the music means. If performers of opera or musical theatre, they make decisions about how to portray a character (even how to stage a production) that engage with the work's larger themes and can raise cultural and ethical issues. If instrumentalists, they make decisions about how to pace a performance, articulate a structure, and handle ensemble interactions that shape how their audiences experience a work. And, as audiences, they filter music through their own preoccupations and paradigms. In this way, I hope that creative writing assignments play a small role in helping my students become at once more self-aware and more liberated as listeners and musicians: encouraging them to listen observantly and sensitize themselves to historical contexts—but also to ask what the music means to them in the twenty-first century or, given an imaginative leap, could mean.

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for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006).