Writing in the Discipline: Bachelor of Arts in Music

**Identified Courses at the Sophomore Level:**
MUS 205 Music History and Literature I  
MUS 206 Music History and Literature II

This two-semester survey is required of all music majors and is typically completed in sequence during the second year of study at Rhode Island College. Assignments are designed toward familiarizing students with various forms of written communication in the field of music. These forms include the following:

**Comparative Analysis**
The purpose of this assignment is to write about interpretive approaches toward music of the distant past. Students are given several recordings of the same piece and are asked to write a comparative analysis in the form of an essay. They are encouraged to begin by providing a historical context about the composer and the work in question (utilizing course materials). Then in the body of the essay, students describe similarities and differences among the interpretations, commenting on musical parameters such as tempo, articulation, accidentals, ornamentation, vocal technique, and instrumentation. To conclude the essay, students reflect on which version they found most convincing and whether, in their opinion, the performers achieved a historically informed performance. The assignment is assessed on the clarity of the writing, attention to musical detail, and use of appropriate terminology.

**Stylistic Analysis**
Students are asked to write a stylistic analysis of a piece of texted music from the early seventeenth century. A score, recording, and supplementary material will be provided. In order to situate the composer and the piece in a historical context, students will be introduced to Grove Online, an important resource for music research available from Adams Library. In addition to historical methods, the assignment allows students to synthesize knowledge acquired in the music theory curriculum, since the assigned piece will exhibit clear tonal patterns typical of the common practice period (e.g., an ostinato bass line). Students will be expected to analyze the piece’s form and phrase structure, the relationship between text and music, as well aspects of texture, harmony, and instrumentation.

**Research Paper 1**
This paper is assigned at the end of the first semester, after students have practiced the types of analytical writing described above. It is intended to strengthen research skills in the field of music generally and music history in particular. Students are invited to develop a research project around one of the composers discussed in class. The paper will examine details of the composer’s biography that are most relevant for understanding his/her music, including information about teachers, students, patrons, religious/cultural background, travels, instruments played, professional positions or institutional affiliations, performance contexts, major historical events, etc. In addition to course materials, students are asked to consult at least three outside sources of scholarly merit. They are also expected to locate a score and recording of at least one significant work and to provide analytical commentary in the body of their paper.
A main goal of this assignment is developing research skills that can be applied to various career paths in the field of music. Students will learn the basics of the Library of Congress system and how to find musical materials (e.g., “M” for music scores, “ML” for books about music history and literature, and “MT” for instructional and analytical material). Class time will also be devoted to accessing scholarly literature and streaming resources available online. Students will learn how to use databases available through Adams Library, including JSTOR, Naxos Music Library, and Opera in Video. Citation styles will be discussed, and students will be expected to cite sources properly in their final papers.

**Interpretation of Primary Sources**
In the second semester of study, students continue to refine the materials and methods of written discourse in the field of music. This assignment focuses on the integration of primary sources into the writing process. Students are provided a packet of readings on a familiar composer, containing perspectives from his/her contemporaries on matters related to musical practice and aesthetics. Students are then asked to write a critical essay, connecting their reading of the primary sources with pieces of music that have been covered in class or that they may have performed in lessons and ensembles. The instructor will offer strategies on how to approach primary sources, with an aim toward selecting quotations for inclusion in the essay. The act of synthesis will be stressed, so that students learn to craft their own interpretation around the primary source material.

**Program Note or Concert Review**
The goal of this assignment is to practice forms of writing associated with the concert experience. Students will learn successful techniques of music writing for the general public, in which the prose should be engaging and accessible. They will learn how to integrate historical and cultural information into the program note or concert review, while still focusing on music as a sonic event.

For the program note, students are instructed to choose a multi-movement work from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. They may choose to write about a selection from class, in which case they will become familiar with the work in its entirety (not just an excerpted movement). Students may also write a program note on a piece they are learning in private lessons or performing on a recital, provided it is a multi-movement instrumental piece, song cycle, or the equivalent. In preparing to write the program note, students will read samples by professional program annotators. They will be reminded that a program note is intended to convey information that would benefit an educated listener in a live concert setting. Generally this would include relevant historical information that might enhance the listening experience. The program note should also contain commentary about each movement, especially information about the form and any unusual or striking features that are discernible on first listening.

For the concert review, students will begin by consulting examples from professional reviewers contained in the *New York Times*, *Boston Musical Intelligencer*, and similar publications. Students will then select a concert to attend that features music from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. They will prepare for the concert experience by researching the music on the program, attending a preconcert lecture if one is offered, and reading the program notes carefully. After the concert, students will craft a review that combines historical insight about the
music in question with descriptions of the live event. Students may share personal responses to the music, critique the quality of the performance, evaluate the use of historical performance practices (where applicable), describe the performers’ gestures and interactions, or comment on audience behavior and reaction.

**Research Paper 2**

At the end of the second semester, students will be given another opportunity to research a topic of personal interest, generally drawn from the twentieth-century repertoire of American music. They will be expected to apply research methodologies learned throughout the year and to produce a thesis-driven account that is well written, well organized, and displays evidence of bibliographic research.

**Identified Course at the Senior Level:**

**PFA 461 Senior Seminar**

In this course, senior candidates spend the semester developing individual projects from among the following options:

1) Completing a substantial research paper on a topic in music history and literature or ethnomusicology
2) Completing an in-depth analytical essay on a topic in music theory or music criticism
3) Presenting a lecture-recital with a supplementary written component (generally a research-oriented term paper)
4) Creating a musical composition and organizing its performance, with a supplementary written component (generally program notes and evaluation of the creative and rehearsal process)
5) Leading a performance as conductor or collaborating in a chamber music recital, with a supplementary written component (generally program notes and evaluation of the creative and rehearsal process)

Every project will be different but will involve a significant amount of research and a final written component. Early in the semester, short writing assignments will be completed to prepare students for later stages of their work. These assignments might take the form of a sample program note, a concert review, or a précis of an academic journal article. As students begin defining individual topics, they will turn in annotated bibliographies and/or discographies. Instruction will be provided on the proper citation of sources typically used in writing about music, including books and articles as well as archival material, manuscripts/facsimile editions, letters, interviews, librettos, printed music, and sound recordings. In addition, students will become familiar with online resources for music research, utilizing databases such as JSTOR, Grove Music Online, and Naxos Music Library. The next stage of the semester will involve peer review, in which students exchange rough drafts and provide their classmates with written feedback. Final submissions will represent the culmination of this process, with significant class time devoted to discussion of research techniques and critique of work-in-progress. In addition to group sessions, students will meet individually with the instructor throughout the semester. With this flexible yet systematic approach, the seminar will aim to provide each individual student with writing instruction appropriate to his/her particular career path in the field of music.