

Asking questions

The strongest step in the right direction in any educational experience is asking the right questions—meaning, questions that expand your knowledge, build upon what you know, and take your learning in unexpected directions. Below are some of the excellent questions you came up with to guide any encounter with a new piece of music.

Some basics

Who made this piece of music? How many people were involved?

When was it made?

Where was it made?

How was it made?

What does it sound like?

Power

Who decided, determined, or allowed this piece of music to be made, premiered, or produced?

What political system, climate, or ruler was in place at the time?

Why was this piece of music made?

Was it made for a specific location or occasion?

Social structures

Where did a musician learn their skills? [+ other biography questions about the musician]

What was their socio-economic (class) status?

What encouraged or inspired the musician to create this piece of music?

How does this piece of music reflect or express a belief system?

How does this piece of music reflect the place where it was made?

Were multiple cultures involved in the making of this music?

Who else was allowed or able to make music like this?

How have other people studied this piece of music?

How has this piece of music influenced other musicians?

How was this piece of music used in people's lives? What role does this music play socially?

[These questions ask about function]

How was this piece of music distributed or shared with listeners?

Where would this music typically be heard?

Who is (was) the intended audience of this piece of music?

What kind of people had (or have!) access to this music?

Was this type of music socially acceptable, appropriate, controversial, or banned at the time it was made, premiered, or released?

Did this piece of music reaffirm or break down the social structures of its time?

What were the values placed on music at the time it was created?

What is this piece of music's relationship to the past or to things that have come before it?

How is this piece of music similar to other kinds of music? How is it dissimilar to other kinds of music? [These questions ask about style]

What instruments (or other aspects of material culture) were available to the musician?

What instruments were used? Why?

When did that instrument come about? When was that instrument invented?

Personal bias

What did the musician want to get across, or what did they intend?

What is the most interesting sound used (and what does “interesting” mean)?

Where do the audience’s expectations or taste come from?

How does this piece make me feel?

Do I like this piece?

What am I already familiar with?

Why do people dislike this music or this musician?

Is this the kind of music I see myself showing to others?

How do we know that people enjoy this music? How do people show that they enjoy this music?

How did people of the time react to this piece of music?

How have people’s opinions over time changed with regard to this piece of music?

How have people’s opinions over time changed this style or genre of music?

What would another person think of this piece of music?

How strong are your own personal biases against this kind of music?

What are my limitations as a listener? Am I able to identify details in the music? What am I missing?