

## Listening to Motive

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Show how music can make an argument, and how arguments can sing.

Writing Focus: *motive*

Project Stage: *developing an argument*

Teacher Preparation: *medium*

Student Preparation: *low*

Estimated Time: *60-80 minutes*

Home Discipline: *Music*

### EXERCISE

**Prep Work:** Bring two pieces to class: 1) Gordon Harvey’s definition of motive; and 2) Anna Meredith’s “Nautilus” sound recording (or any piece of music, film, or story that makes a striking reversal or reframing move).

**Step One:** (10-15 minutes) Begin with a reading, or ideally a re-reading, of Harvey’s definition of motive by student volunteers (handout):

**Motive:** the intellectual context that you establish for your topic and thesis at the start of your essay, in order to suggest why someone, besides your instructor, might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued—why your thesis isn’t just obvious to all, why other people might hold *other* theses (that you think are wrong). Your motive should be aimed at your audience: it won’t necessarily be the reason you first got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with the topic. Indeed it’s where you suggest that your argument *isn’t* idiosyncratic, but rather is generally interesting. The motive you set up should be genuine: a misapprehension or puzzle that an intelligent reader (not a straw dummy) would really have, a point that such a reader would really overlook. Defining motive should be the main business of your introductory paragraphs, where it is usually introduced by a form of the complicating word “But.”

*From Gordon Harvey’s “Elements of the Academic Essay”*

Ask students how this complication, this pivot, might be put into play in works or genres outside of the academic essay. Where else might one find this explicit turning away from a conventional understanding? Give students a few minutes to respond in writing to this question, and share with a partner. I like to have students speak for their partners when we regroup because it encourages them to listen to each other attentively and develop their ability to paraphrase/condense/rephrase, etc. At the beginning of the semester, it also gives them the chance to introduce their colleagues to each other.

**Step Two:** (20-25 minutes) Now turn to Meredith’s “Nautilus.” (If your students haven’t offered “music” in the previous step, articulate it as an enticing possibility: “What about in sound? In instrumental music? How might that look?”). Play the first few moments of the piece and ask students to write down what they hear, represented in whatever form feels comfortable—verbal descriptions are often as valuable as music notation—and then ask for volunteers to offer their observations, recording these on the board as you go. Then continue through the musical text, playing successive segments of the track followed by simple prompts—what do you hear? what seems to be important here?—while continuing to record the students’ observations. Make sure to stop the last segment just before the music makes its striking reversal. (For “Nautilus” I use the following segments: 0:00-0:30, 30:00-1:36, 1:36-2:34, and 2:34-3:05.)

**Step Three:** (20-25 minutes) Before playing any more of the piece, ask students to describe in writing what they think could/should/will happen next, and then to share their ideas with the rest of the class. Discuss the students’ hypotheses both in terms of what work they would do musically, as well as (turning back to Harvey) what they might look like in argumentative terms—as though the opening of “Nautilus” were the beginning of an essay. With this analogy in mind, encourage them to see how the opening of the piece might represent the “setup” of an essay—the (temporarily) persuasive premise that precedes its necessary complication—such that when the pivot finally happens, the attendant disorientation is argumentatively satisfying. (Or, in the case of “Nautilus,” musically profound.)

**Step Four:** (10-15 minutes) Now back up and play the full piece, this time from start to finish, allowing the miraculous moment to unfold. Ask students what happens at the pivot, continuing to note their observations on the board.

*A hint for beyond the music classroom:* Depending on their musical expertise, your students may or may not immediately recognize the pivot. In a music composition seminar, students will reliably hear the move as deeply destabilizing with respect to the old material but deeply satisfying with respect to the way the rhythm slots into a new pulse. Students with less musical training may hear “Nautilus” differently. The initial rhythmic pattern might feel so strong as to override the new material, so to speak, or students might hear chaos rather than coalescence. In cases where the move falls flat, encourage a bodily understanding of the music; clapping along to the initial rhythm and trying to sustain it as the new material enters is one way to feel the rhythms against each other. Or half the class can clap the old rhythm while the other claps the new rhythm.

To conclude the exercise, ask students to return once more to motive, mapping key elements of Harvey’s definition onto the unfolding stages of the musical piece: expectations established, hints dropped that this isn’t to be taken wholly at face value, signals that a pivot is coming, and then the actual move itself.

## REFLECTIONS

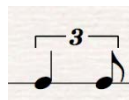
Sonification as a practice refers to turning a data system or set into sound. We can hear the data stream, can engage it sensorially; suddenly the flocking behavior of birds or a population’s

growth over time has a perceptual component, making the data tangible in our ears, as a time-bound aural experience. This exercise aims to sonify in a different way: it takes a core concept in writing pedagogy and asks what it might sound like.

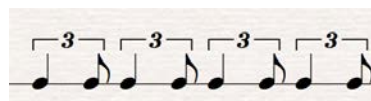
In teaching a music composition seminar, I found myself analyzing what made a certain move in a particular piece of music so compelling and how it might serve as a model technique for students in their own compositions. As a teacher of writing, I suspected that there was a writerly way of understanding the dramatic strategy in question, that it made an offering to the listener in the same way that good writing makes an offering to the reader.

In the writing classroom I often describe that offer-making, centered on the motivating move, as a kind of redirection or bait-and-switch: here's what we can agree upon, dear reader, or how the relevant literature comes to consensus, or what our shared understanding of this topic might be. Except now I'm going to challenge all of those things; the built frame was only ever provisional, a stepladder that, once used to change the light bulb, dissolves and grants us the power to float around the room.

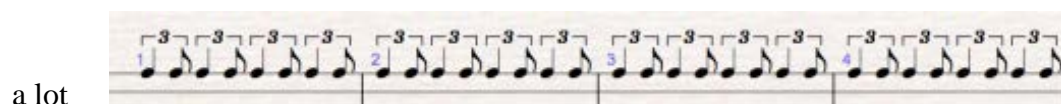
The metaphor becomes abstract and difficult to manage, as you can see. That's less the case, however, with a sonic experience of motive, one that is perceptually palpable and dramatically powerful. When I conduct this exercise with Meredith's beguiling "Nautilus," I use simple, unpitched musical notations to make concrete my students' observations about the piece. For example, the repetitive opening of "Nautilus" usually prompts them to offer some version of the observation, "an obsessive rhythmic figure." I then present this visually on the board, representing the LONG-short figure this way:



As students respond to the subsequent segments ("The sounds world is primarily synthesized," "The timbres are always shifting," "That rhythm repeats everywhere" or "The line moves from low to high"), I make the development of this rhythmic figure the focal point of discussion, since it most fundamentally contributes to the propulsion that will, in time, set up listeners for the destabilizing moment. I also continue to sketch out the progression of the tune in response to the students offering their own observations, with notations that might look something like this:



The rhythmic cell, repeated



a lot



in an ascending contour

By the time we complete Step Three, my students usually have a clear sense of the work they want the pivot to accomplish musically (“if it keeps repeating this way I’m going to get frustrated”; “if it fades and ends I’m going to be bored”), as well as how it might analogize to writing (“the initial premise is going to remain the operating premise throughout, and we won’t discover anything; it might actually look like a book report”). And once they finally hear the reversal in Step Four, I help them annotate the pivot itself:

A straightforward “boom bap” (kick and snare) rhythm



which radically shifts our understanding of the rhythmic figure that’s been articulated in so many ways, giving us



in which the top line is that LONG-short rhythm, but with a completely different rhythmic sense owing to the new material that reframes it. From its original classic shuffle rhythm, four LONG-shorts per measure (Art Blakey’s “Hammerhead” comes to mind as an iconic example), the overarching feel shifts to a classic “boom bap,” kick on 1 and 3 and snare on 2 and 4, in a slower tempo. This is motive, sonified. (In class, I sometimes also represent the kick-snare rhythm by rocking foot-to-foot *while* clapping the old LONG-short figure.)

The reframing in “Nautilus” works at the level of pulse and rhythm, but other forms of musical reframing are effective too. To illustrate harmonic reframing, for example, I use a tune that I wrote myself, in which Bb major melodic cells suddenly sound in the relative minor when G enters in the bass. Another exciting reframing move is based on our understanding of music in context. I play a field recording of Ghanaian postal workers canceling stamps without telling students what they’re hearing, asking the same sorts of questions about what seems to be important to the music. Then, after discussion, I reveal that we are listening to people making music to pass the time at work. The important strategy, to my mind, is a radical reframing of the text in question, which can be found in many different media or genres. Think of viewing Salvador Dali’s “Gala Contemplating the Mediterranean Sea Which at Twenty Meters Becomes the Portrait of Abraham Lincoln (Homage to Rothko)” at different distances, or the big reveal in

films like *The Usual Suspects*, *The Sixth Sense*, or *The Wizard of Oz* (because it was all a dream). It might even be an academic paper, in which one also listens for motive. Or anything, really, with a significant reframing of what we think are its core dramatic or narrative premises.

As important as that dramatic move—Dorothy wakes up!—might be, it can't work without first building out the provisional context: the tornado. Or, in the case of "Nautilus," a driving rhythmic figure that says "this is what this music is about." Or, in the case of the academic paper, a belief that we'd actually hold, a premise that is actually persuasive as opposed to a straw man.

In the music classroom, this exercise prepares students for an assignment in which they'll create their own pivot move compositionally. Initially this might be done in the form of short studies around, say, a reframing of pulse, or of a melodic cell. The real goal, though, is to do this outside the context of an etude, to make music that offers listeners a persuasive, compelling premise and then radically shifts their perspective on that premise. The aim is that we hear retroactively, in a sense, re-understand what's come before; we listen backwards in time. So too with motive in prose; we pivot around the premise that initially built consensus and in that rotation can't read it the same way anymore. And the impossibility of re-reading without the new understanding motive affords shows us how far we've come, how much we've grown.