

Sample Musicology Entrance Exam

Description:

In this exam, you will be presented with several passages of historical texts. Your task is to choose TWO and provide commentaries to explain their significance. Your answer should situate the passages in their historical contexts and comment on the insights they provide about the musical aesthetics, culture, and/or politics of the time. If the passage is part of a larger musical debate, feel free to comment on the other side of the disagreement. Each answer should be between 250-500 words. 80 minutes are allotted for the test.

Your answer will be assessed according to the degree of specificity and nuance with which you are able to dissect and engage with the passage; the relevance and the level of detail of the context you provide; and your understanding of why this passage is important to the history of music.

See below for a sample passage, a model answer, and an explanation of the answer. Bear in mind that there is no single correct answer for any of these passages, and you should feel free, within the criteria for relevance stated above, to address the texts in ways that suit your interests and knowledge areas.

NOTE: YOU MAY NOT CONSULT ANY EXTERNAL RESOURCES (TEXTS, INTERNET, NOTES) while you are taking the tests. These exams are not open book or open note. We utilize plagiarism software to ensure all students are taking the tests without consulting external sources.

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Sample Passage. Cristoforo Ivanovich on opera in seventeenth-century Venice (1681):

The novel introduction of musical dramas perfectly suited Venice's temper, inclined as it is towards the tender and the delicate; it would seem the Sirens' song is sweet and gentle only on the waters; and Fable would settle here most agreeably, were it not for the danger that usually accompanies [the Sirens'] song. There were in Venice at that time two theaters which presented plays, namely those at San Cassiano and San Salvatore; but afterwards there were many more, some of which were used for the presentation now of plays, now of musical dramas, while others presented only dramas.... As a consequence, the Carnival became even more remarkable than it had been formerly, every year attracting a

considerable number of distinguished foreigners who came to enjoy so delicious and at the same time virtuous an entertainment, one that employs the most exalted minds in both poetry and music, select and exquisite male and female voices, and the most bizarre inventions in its costumes, scenery, machines, flights, and dances. So that, if in earlier days the Carnival had been remarkable only on account of the masks, banquets, and festive assemblies, it became much more so on account of the plays that were added to it in the two theaters of San Cassiano and San Salvatore; but it has become remarkable to a supreme degree in our own time, in which masks, banquets, festive assemblies, plays, and musical dramas are conjoined, so that entire nights are consumed in an ecstasy of delicious entertainments. And more important, the diversity of the prices of admission facilitates greater attendance. For the nobility and merchants, thanks to their income and commerce, have the means to be continually satisfied, as do the common people, prices being very much lower than they were before.

Sample Answer

Ivanovich is here describing the birth of public opera that took place in Venice around 50 years before this passage was written. He names specifically San Cassiano, which was the first theatre that hosted an itinerant troupe of actors and singers who came to Venice during the Carnival season and put on the first ever opera for a paying public. Ivanovich devotes his attention to the Carnival period because Venetian carnivals were world famous; they contributed a lot to tourism, which was one of the conditions that favored the uptake of public opera in Venice rather than other parts of Italy. The population of the city swelled to three times its size, ensuring a steady flow of patrons. Moreover, the partiers came expecting entertainment—as Ivanovich says, there were already masks, banquets, and festive assemblies—and opera easily made for an additional attraction. Other aspects of Venetian society that made for a hospitable home for public opera was its liberal attitude, its political stability, and the large number of wealthy patrons eager to support the arts.

Although Ivanovich calls opera a “virtuous” entertainment, it was arguably anything but. Carnival masks enabled anonymity generally and fostered licentious behavior all over Venice. Theatres boxes specifically allowed all manner of

Situates passage immediately in context and points to significance.

Explains detail about San Cassiano in passage and why it’s significant.

Identifies another important aspect of the passage—Venetian Carnival—and explains why this cultural information is important to the topic at hand.

Additional information about Venice not contained in the passage but adds further political context.

Picks out another detail (“virtuous”) mentioned by Ivanovich and provides contradictory evidence

improprieties to occur (courtesans were often invited to operas). And operas themselves, up to the time Ivanovich was writing, were full of immoral plots. In Monteverdi's *Poppea*, for example, the villains triumph, and Cavalli's operas were frequently full of sexual innuendos. It was partially the licentiousness of opera libretti that spurred the Arcadian reforms, yielding opera seria at the close of the 17th century.

about culture and operatic aesthetics, citing examples.

As Ivanovich explains toward the end of the passage, the range of prices accommodated everyone from the nobility to the common people. This marks a remarkable change for the genre of opera both in a conceptual and practical way. Opera began as courtly entertainment at special events (weddings, for example). As such, it did not need to bring in an income, it did not need to be repeatable, and it only needed to suit the patron's taste. Public opera, on the other hand, had to be financially sound. That meant containing cost by reducing the performing forces (fewer choruses, smaller orchestras) and reusing sets and costumes (leading to a lot of "stereotyped" settings). Public opera also had to cater to general tastes—and the general public wanted star singers. Greater and greater sums were spent to recruit them, and operatic writing skewed increasingly toward showstopping arias that flaunted the singers' abilities. By the time Ivanovich was writing, there was a habit of singers taking their favorite arias from one opera and inserting it into another regardless of context—a phenomenon dubbed baggage or suitcase aria. Some of these conditions and practices would persist for a few centuries.

Yet another important piece of info from the passage, used as a springboard to show relevant knowledge about the broader history and aesthetics of opera as it relates to money, commerce, and access.