The following piece on writing music reviews is from Chapter 5, “Writing Essays About Music,” of Writing About Music, by Elizabeth S. Abrams, Noël Bisson, Anthony Brandt, Jennifer Baker Kotilaine, and Roberta Lukes.

IV. Reviews
Different disciplines inspire their own genres of writing. One specific to the performing arts is the review, a genre that includes both performance and recording reviews. This section focuses on reviews of live performances because those are the kind students are mainly asked to write.

A. Judgment and Analysis
Reviews in newspapers and magazines report on cultural events. They advise readers on whether or not to attend a performance (if it is to be repeated), and they offer perspective on or insight about the music itself: they provide informed judgment. But because academic writing favors analysis, reviews written in an academic context are usually slightly different. Academic writing tends to reserve judgment for introductions and conclusions, if anywhere, and limits reporting (summary) to a minimum. So writing a review for a class means straddling the divide between journalistic and academic writing.

Your review should be an essay. It should analyze the music and make an argument; it should provide ample evidence for its claims. In this sense, it will be similar to a close analysis: it will analyze the music closely; it might concentrate on a specific theme to illuminate. But your review should also judge; it should evaluate the music or its execution on behalf of interested readers. In essence, your review should answer a reader’s question, “Would my time be well-spent at this concert?”

“Judgment” is a tricky word, easily confused with “opinion.” Opinion is largely independent of hard evidence; it requires gut response; it is personal. A reviewer who relies on opinion would answer the reader’s question with an ineffectual—because wholly personal—reply: “Yes, I enjoyed the performance because it was beautiful”; or “No, I found the music ugly and disorienting.” Judgment, by contrast, is authoritative; it is based on evidence and experience; it requires careful discernment, even comparison. To judge a work, in other words, requires that you understand it. A reviewer judging a performance would answer the reader’s question with a judicious reply: “Yes, though this music is demanding and often jarring, it challenges one’s expectations of compositional unity in useful ways”; or “No, although the performance is technically irreplaceable, the refusal to take interpretive risks made this concert an exercise in affirming the status quo.” Such a response gives reasons; it backs judgments up with evidence.

Reviews of performances generally take two forms: evaluations of new music and evaluations of recent performances of familiar music. The question of judgment is
particularly important when you’re reviewing new music, which may initially confuse or irritate a listener unfamiliar with modern composition. Your opinion—your gut response—might be “it’s ugly; I didn’t like it.” But your judgment—that is, your review—should take into account what the music is striving for. Don’t let your unfamiliarity with certain musical strategies devolve into condemnation; instead, try to understand the “how” and the “why” of the music, the internal logic of the composition. For this reason, although it’s easy to write a negative opinion piece, it’s much harder to write a successful negative review. For a negative judgment to be credible, it must demonstrate that the writer understands the aims of a piece and can show how the music fails to meet those aims. That’s a difficult task.

1. Judging the Composition If you’re writing about a new work, the focus of your review will be the composition itself. Your main task will be to understand it—to determine what its main musical idea is, and to evaluate its methods of developing that idea. How well does the composition achieve its aims? What function do its allusions to other works play? Are its departures from formal conventions of classical music consistent? Does it maintain musical coherence? Such questions inquire about how and why a piece has been constructed in the way you hear it. You’d ask the same kinds of questions if you were reviewing a new work of experimental theater (e.g., performance art) or a work of fiction that uses innovative narrative techniques (e.g., hypertext novels). Such questions are essential to understanding a work, and hence are an essential step in your evaluation of the music.

2. Judging the Performance If you’re writing about a familiar work, on the other hand, you’ll most likely examine the performance. Your task would be to understand and evaluate the interpretation. How different is this performance from others you’ve heard of the same work, either live or recorded, or from an “ideal” performance you’ve imagined? Are the emphases where you’d expect them to be, and if not, what effect is achieved? Does the interpretation alter the meaning of the music or the effect on an audience? These questions, and others like them, get at how and why a piece has been performed in a particular way. They are the kinds of questions a review of a performance of familiar music should address.

B. Writing a Review: An Example A review should include the basic requirements of any essay: a clear focus, sensible structure, concrete evidence. But because its responsibilities are slightly different than those of the usual academic essay (it must report on a recent event; it gives advice to readers), certain features—“orienting,” context, tone—are particularly important. Furthermore, a review of new music requires a slightly different apportioning of energies than a review of a recent performance of relatively familiar music. The differences have mainly to do with what your audience can
be expected to know about the music and its creator, background information that will mainly affect the review’s beginning.

1. Orient Your Readers. The introduction to a review must both establish thesis and “orient” readers to information they need to familiarize themselves with the music. Although any essay introduction requires a certain amount of orienting, this information is especially crucial in a review of a new work. When you review new music, you’re telling your readers about a work they’ve never heard before, possibly by a composer they’ve never heard of, either. So one of the responsibilities of such a review is to fill your readers in on some background information—make sure they know who the composer is and what the scope of the composition is, and (if relevant), some details about the text the music illuminates. A review of a recent performance of Wagner’s Götterdämmerung, by contrast, would not require a detailed overview of Wagner’s place in the pantheon of German composers or an exhaustive rendering of the plot of his “Ring” cycle of music dramas.

In reading the following introduction, take a look at how the author, Summer Finnell, establishes her thesis and orients her audience. This essay, “The Sweet Hereafter: ‘Lemon Drops’ and the Approaching Millennium,” reviews a short work of chamber music, performed for the first time (a world premiere!) in a Harvard music class. (The full text of Summer’s essay may be found in Appendix B.)

As 1998 came to a close, students in Harvard Professor Thomas Kelly’s First Nights class were treated to an eclectic and provoking rumination on the post-modern condition, in the form of Kathryn Alexander’s new work, “Lemon Drops.” The premiere of this three-song piece was given in Sanders Theatre on December 17, by Alexander and baritone Richard Lalli, vibraphonist Paul Fadoul, and double bassist Dennis Christians. Excerpted from four poems by poet Wayne Koestenbaum, “Lemon Drops” follows a struggling artist through a landscape of self-doubt, sexual desire, and artistic anxiety, themes of particular significance for a student audience headed into the last year of the century. As our generation teeters on the brink of the millennium, with all its shadowy associations of chaos, of randomness, of things out of place and time out of joint, we are antsy, hyper-aware of our own position in time. “Lemon Drops” offers an exuberant, inventive, and ultimately triumphant view of this post-modern state of affairs.
Summer’s opening paragraph establishes her analytical lens right away: she’s interested in the relationship of this new work to its cultural and temporal moment. The introduction makes clear what her thesis is (that “Lemon Drops” both reflects and responds to a “post-modern” sensibility that gains urgency with the approaching millennium).

It also implies a judgment: Summer clearly feels that “Lemon Drops” is a successful exercise in modern music, precisely because the music so vividly expresses its cultural moment. Careful readers will note that Summer’s review, on balance, is more analysis than judgment. That’s fine—there’s a spectrum of approaches to the weighting of judgment and analysis. The essay would not have lost anything had it been more direct in its judgment—but it would have lost a great deal had it dropped its analysis.

As importantly, this introduction orients readers right away. The underlined portions show where the paragraph provides information essential to a reader unfamiliar with the music: the composer’s name, the work’s shape (“three song piece”) and instrumentation (voice, vibraphone, bass), its source (Koestenbaum’s poems), a summary of its narrative thread (it “follows a struggling artist . . .”).

2. Establish Context Because a review is both an essay and a form of reportage, your readers will want to know about the circumstances of the performance: who the principal musicians were, where and when the performance took place, for what reason, in what context. Summer gives some of this information in her introduction (she indicates that the audience members were all part of the same lecture course, for instance), but decided to save most of it for a second, “background” paragraph.

How you distribute information—and what information to include—will be up to you, of course, and will be determined by your thesis. There is no set formula for essays. But when you make decisions about what details to include at the beginning of an essay and what to save for later, remember that you’re describing new music, that your readers won’t have stores of knowledge about it, and that they’ll need some context right away to prevent confusion. (Unless instructed otherwise, provide this context even if your reader is your teacher and attended the performance with you. It’s part of what makes a review what it is.)

With that in mind, take a look at how Summer includes relevant contextual information to build upon the claims of her thesis:

The premiere’s opening sequence revealed a tension between tradition and innovation that proved deeply resonant for the 21st-century-minded audience of “Lemon Drops.” The performance space itself offered the quintessence of tradition—an oak-paneled
stage on the campus of the country’s oldest university, flanked by statues of Classical orators and plaques with Latin inscriptions. The performers seemed to take their cue from this arena, stepping on stage with a sense of ceremony that moved the buzzing crowd to immediate silence. The student audience had witnessed a dress rehearsal of “Lemon Drops” earlier in the day, but the difference in the atmosphere was tangible; the premiere performance, steeped as it was in artistic tradition, demanded formal attention. As the audience waited for the first notes, however, that attention was relentlessly drawn toward details which threatened to unravel the premiere’s sanctity. The stage was covered with garishly painted designs left behind by an earlier show, an oversight that created a jarring intrusion into the stately performance space. Viewed in the midst of the theater’s pomp, these fluorescent-hued backdrops offered a jolting diversion from the gravity of both setting and occasion—an inadvertent comment on tradition, however, that fittingly set the context for the music that followed. Similarly, empty chairs stacked up almost randomly in the corners of the stage evoked the atmosphere of a Parisian café, subtly preparing the audience for the themes of conflict expressed in the Paris-based second song, “L’Heure Bleue.”

Here Summer provides details about the circumstances of the performance (the sound of the assembled crowd, the reference to the dress rehearsal most had attended, the leftover sets from a play staged in the same space) as part of her argument. Handled differently, this information might seem unrelated, even distracting, but its relevance is made immediately clear by the topic sentence (lines 1-4) and concluding few sentences (lines 23-33) of the paragraph. The contextual information begins to develop and flesh out Summer’s claims about the music: the accident of juxtaposition, the coincidence of “garishly painted designs” left on a stately stage, provides a suitable analogy for the juxtapositions and “themes of conflict” in the music itself. The orienting you do for your readers, in other words, can help drive your argument.

3. **Organization** A review necessarily walks a thin line between reportage and argument. As reportage, a responsible review will provide readers a guide to the work as a whole. This is especially true of a review of new music, for which a review’s description of the architecture of the work may be the only account the general reader
will ever have of it. (Of course, a review’s evaluation of a performance might also inspire readers to go hear a repeat performance themselves!) This guide could come in several forms: an overview of the music’s structure (probably at the beginning of the essay—a kind of summary of the work), or an essay structure that tracks the organization of the music.

The first option probably works best for an essay focusing on a specific scene or moment that, unpacked, reveals something significant about the work more generally. (Heidi Brown’s essay, in section I, uses this strategy.) The latter option works well when your goal is to relate the aim of the whole work to a central theme that your essay analyzes. Summer’s essay makes use of the latter option. Her essay follows each of the three sections of “Lemon Drops” in turn.

Although such an organization has the advantage of giving readers a clear idea of how a work progresses from beginning to end, it also has an obvious drawback: it’s quite easy to forget that your essay must have an internal, argumentative logic of its own when you’ve structured it to follow a pre-existing structure, that of the music itself. It’s easy simply to write a “walk-through” analysis, so the essay’s thesis must provide a good reason for such an organization. Summer’s essay does: although it takes us through each of the sections of “Lemon Drops” in turn, it isn’t mechanically organized. According to the logic of her essay, we must follow the music chronologically because that is how its “post-modernity” is revealed: the first section lays out a crisis revealed by music and text; the next section complicates that crisis; the last provides a kind of catharsis or resolution.¹ The following sentences begin the analysis of the music itself. These sentences signpost the section, subordinating the chronology of the music to the argument Summer is making about it:

¹ It’s worth noting that Summer’s revisions included clarifying the internal logic of her essay. Earlier versions emphasized chronology more than the underlying argument, and so the essay initially had the feel of a “walk-through” analysis. Summer revised by clarifying the logic of her argument rather than relying too heavily on the logic of the music itself.
The first sentence (lines 1-5) remind readers of the thesis and tell them what this section is about, the anxieties about artistic legacy that are a familiar theme today. The second (lines 5-8) extends this subject to the concert-goers, linking the music to its context. And the third (lines 8-11) introduces readers to the evidence this one-paragraph section will analyze, the burden of artistic precedent that “threatens to overwhelm the speaker” in the first of the three songs in “Lemon Drops.”

4. Evidence  As in any essay, a responsible review must analyze the music. Had Summer simply declared that “Lemon Drops” capitalizes on millennial anxiety, and then proceeded to expostulate on such anxiety without really referencing the music, the argument would have collapsed: it would have been an exercise in opinion-making rather than one of analysis and judgment. Instead, the essay analyzes both music and text—it adduces evidence.

See, for example, the wealth of musical and textual detail invoked and analyzed in the following lines, the continuation of the paragraph opening quoted above. This is the evidence Summer provides to back up her claim that the first song is concerned with questions of artistic heritage:

... Played on the vibraphone and bass, this introduction creates a mood of expectancy and suspense fulfilled by Lalli’s delivery of the first few lines of text. The speaker begins by making several artistic references, sung with rapid-fire delivery by Lalli, only to conclude on a note of dejection when Lalli mourns “blankness in a life by me.” The bass, which accompanies this line with a scratching, harsh sound, indicates the speaker’s air of inferiority to his artistic predecessors; the jarring, discordant effect reinforces the speaker’s attitude of despair. Lalli’s alternating use of recitative and aria extends this timely theme of artistic heritage. Indeed, the anxiety of the poem’s persona is only intensified by these techniques, standard in operatic tradition, which reinforce his expressed inability to create something wholly new. He uses recitative while speaking disdainfully of his daily existence, calling himself “Bloke” as if to emphasize his pitiful ordinariness, and while recalling the mundane details
of his routine, sighing “Bloke took out the garbage / Bloke fed the cat.” Lalli bursts into song for a return to the subject of art and desire, first asking jadedly “how many boys did I desire tonight?” trilling the word “desire” with a theatrical flourish and then lamenting that “it’s not easy to write a poem in English / no matter how huge your page.” Here the bass assumes a dominant role as Christians creates a shooting, pinging sound, adding a futuristic, space-age feel to Lalli’s complaint. With this move, Alexander’s music gives the text a particular relevance, linking the speaker’s artistic struggle to our own age. The new millennium is a huge page indeed, and just as the artistic legacy of the centuries weighs down upon the speaker, so do past centuries of human achievement weigh down upon us.
This paragraph describes and analyzes several musical features that support the paragraph’s main claim: the “harsh sound” of the bass, whose “discordant effect reinforces the speaker’s attitude of despair” (lines 8-12); the ironic use of the traditional operatic techniques of aria and recitative (lines 12-29); and the “futuristic” quality of the bass music at the end, a quality that “link[s] the speaker’s artistic struggle to our own age” (lines 29-35). This analysis hinges on the careful attention Summer paid to the details of the music as she listened to the performance, and to her prompt drafting of the essay.

5. **Tone** In order to make your review credible to your readers, it’s critical to establish a respectful and analytical tone. Readers will not trust a review that appears less than objective. Be generous with your assessment of the music, and remember that you must always back up your judgment with musical evidence.

The same generosity will serve you well if you find yourself reviewing a mediocre performance. In such a case, you’d most likely be reviewing a production of well-known music—that is, the music most likely to be popular with a wide range of groups. Clearly, you’d use a different set of criteria to evaluate a performance by an amateur music group than you would for one by the Berlin Philharmonic. Interpretation is less in question here than competence, and the circumstances of a production might be more important to your review than how close the performance comes to an ideal standard. A good way to make sure that you evaluate fairly is to judge the performance in context.

The following example provides an elegant solution to the problem of dealing honestly with a mediocre performance. Writing for a large metropolitan newspaper, the author reviewed a less-than-perfect production of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony given by the student orchestra at a local university, a concert meant to honor the conductor, retiring after having led the orchestra for many years:

“The Ninth” has struck terror into the hearts of all symphonic composers since its premiere in 1824, and its ever-mutating labyrinth of variational and developmental procedures daunts interpreters. The students in the orchestra, who spend their days thinking about particle physics and DNA recombination, are used to complexity. Whatever they might lack in technical finesse, they compensate for with keen intelligence, focus, and a high purpose that carried them over the rough spots and swept them up in Beethoven’s apotheosis of joy and brotherhood....
There were over 250 souls on-stage as the soft horn fifths sounded at the top of the work. Beethoven’s unsettling tonal ambiguities were compounded by some harmonic incertitudes, but intonation improved thereafter. The huge scherzo, despite some ensemble static, had a hearty swing to it; the horns and bassoons shone in the trio.... [The percussionist’s] timpani playing, alternately savage and subtle, throbbed at the heart of both movements.²

The writer of this review honestly describes the shortcomings of this performance: no one reading it would believe the concert was of professional quality. Yet she also recognizes the musicians’ strengths and the event’s value as an occasion of amateur music-making. She shows that it was a fitting tribute to the conductor, a quality, in this case, as important as technical execution. Most importantly, she treats the performers fairly by respecting their effort and achievement and not holding them to unreasonable standards.

6. Drafting Strategy Writing a review places special demands on your memory; drafting your review as soon as possible after the performance will help you remember its special features and provide strong musical evidence for your claims. So a quick turnaround time on your first draft is essential. (It helps, of course, to pay close attention to the music as it’s played, taking good notes along the way, and to write down your impressions immediately after the performance.)

Summer reports that she wrote the draft of her review within a day or so of having heard “Lemon Drops” on the last day of the fall term; she revised and polished the essay over her winter break, turning it in when she returned for reading period. The quick drafting gave her every chance of remembering subtleties of music and performance that might otherwise have been lost with time. When you write a review, it’s worth employing the same strategy. You only have one chance to hear the music, and since you’re reviewing a performance, not the score, your evidence will come from the specifics of the musical account you’ve just heard.

The Sweet Hereafter: “Lemon Drops” and the Approaching Millennium
by Summer Finnell

As 1998 came to a close, students in Harvard Professor Thomas Kelly’s First Nights class were treated to an eclectic and provoking rumination on the post-modern condition, in the form of Kathryn Alexander’s new work, “Lemon Drops.” The premiere of this three-song piece was given in Sanders Theatre on December 17, by Alexander and baritone Richard Lalli, vibraphonist Paul Fadoul, and double bass musician Dennis Christians. Excerpted from four poems by poet Wayne Koestenbaum, “Lemon Drops” follows a struggling artist through a landscape of self-doubt, sexual desire, and artistic anxiety, themes of particular significance for a student audience headed into the last year of century. As our generation teeters on the brink of millennium, with all its shadowy associations of chaos, of randomness, of things out of place and time out of joint, we are antsy, hyper-aware of our own position in time. “Lemon Drops” offers an exuberant, inventive, and ultimately triumphant view of this post-modern state of affairs.

The premiere’s opening sequence revealed a tension between tradition and innovation that proved deeply resonant for the 21st-century-minded audience of “Lemon Drops.” The performance space itself offered the very quintessence of tradition—an oak-paneled stage on the campus of the country’s oldest university, flanked by statues of Classical orators and plaques with Latin inscriptions. The performers seemed to take their cue from this arena, stepping on stage with a sense of ceremony that moved the
buzzing crowd to immediate silence. The student audience had witnessed a dress rehearsal of “Lemon Drops” earlier in the week, but the difference in the atmosphere was tangible; the premiere performance, steeped as it was in artistic tradition, demanded formal attention. As the audience waited for the first notes, however, that attention was relentlessly drawn toward details which threatened to unravel the premiere’s sanctity. The stage was covered with garishly painted designs left behind by an earlier show, an oversight that created a jarring intrusion into the stately performance space. Viewed in the midst of the theater’s pomp, these fluorescent-hued backdrops offered a jolting diversion from the gravity of both setting and occasion—an inadvertent comment on tradition, however, that fittingly set the context for the music that followed. Similarly, empty chairs stacked up almost randomly in the corners of the stage evoked the atmosphere of a Parisian café, subtly preparing the audience for the themes of conflict expressed in the Paris-based second song, “L’Heure Bleue.”

The first song is unified by the writer’s concern with his place in the “grand scheme” of literature, a familiar post-modern preoccupation which introduces anxieties about inadequacy that inform “Lemon Drops.” As millennium fever strikes, even non-artists are concerned with legacy, and those of us in the audience found ourselves sharing the writer’s concern. The first notes filled the space with the exotic sounds of the vibraphone, its vaguely jazzy opening calling up the musical heritage that threatens to overwhelm the speaker. Played on the vibraphone and bass, this introduction creates a mood of expectancy and suspense fulfilled by Lalli’s delivery of the first few lines of text. The speaker begins by making several artistic references, sung with rapid-fire delivery by Lalli, only to conclude on a note of dejection when Lalli mourns “blankness in a life by me.” The bass, which accompanies this line with a scratching, harsh sound, indicates the speaker’s air of inferiority to his artistic predecessors; the jarring, discordant effect reinforces the speaker’s attitude of despair. Lalli’s alternating use of recitative and aria extends this timely theme of artistic heritage. Indeed, the anxiety of the poem’s persona is only intensified by these techniques, standard in operatic tradition, which reinforce his expressed inability to create something wholly new. He uses recitative while speaking disdainfully of his daily existence, calling himself “Bloke” as if to emphasize his pitiful ordinariness, and while recalling the mundane details of his routine, sighing “Bloke took out the garbage / Bloke fed
the cat." Lalli bursts into song for a return to the subject of art and desire, first asking jadedly “how many boys did I desire tonight?” trilling the word “desire” with a theatrical flourish and then lamenting that “it’s not easy to write a poem in English / no matter how huge your page.” Here the bass assumes a dominant role as Christians creates a shooting, pinging sound, adding a futuristic, space-age feel to Lalli’s complaint. With this move, Alexander’s music gives the text a particular relevance for our post-modern sensibilities, linking the speaker’s artistic struggle to our own age. The new millennium is a huge page indeed, and just as the artistic legacy of the centuries weighs down upon the speaker, so do past centuries of human achievement weigh down upon us.

The climax of the first song captures the heart of these concerns, again expressed in terms of innovation versus traditional structures. But here we encounter the music beginning to break with the weight of the past, the weight of expectations. All three performers alternate lines of the text while gathering around the bass and beating it like a drum, creating a conclusion of particular appeal to Alexander’s audience. The spectacle is less notable for the lines the musicians speak than for the fact that it is the musicians who speak them. Conditioned by traditional musical performances, we are expecting the usual rigidly defined roles of musician and singer, but Alexander instead subverts the fixed roles, allowing the musicians to break out of their routine positions and participate in the singing, while Lalli is allowed to be a percussionist for a few moments as well. As students conditioned to the fixed roles of instructor and student, the jumbled positions were a frightening but exhilarating symbol of our era’s structural unraveling. The performers position around the bass and the chanting invoke images of tribal dances, and when the three performers sing out together “if I were with child I’d be witty about it!!” the metaphor becomes clear: gathering around the bass symbolizes a reverence for art, as does the performers’ desire to be “with child” in an artistic sense, to birth a new and creative artistic expression. The chanting and “drums” thus form a new fertility dance in which the yearning for reproduction through sex, irreparably complicated by our age, is replaced with the speaker’s longing for a worthy artistic legacy.

“L’Heure Bleue,” or “The Blue Hour’’ which takes its title from a French perfume, deepens the exploration of this element of sexual complication. Opening with a seductive bass line, “L’Heure Bleue” is the writer’s love song to Paris, full of
contemplation of frustrated desire in a period when sex too often meant death. References to French culture abound, linking an avant-garde cabaret style to other icons of French culture (“Jean Rhys mentions L’Heure Bleue / So do I!”). The playful giddiness of “L’Heure”’s nostalgia stops short with an aside about visiting famous graves, which the bass and vibraphone accompany with slow, morose undertones. The somber mood continues with a reference to AIDS, often referred to as the post-modern Plague, when the speaker comments that “Pere-Lachaise is the gayest part of Paris, though saw no gay guys there / graves are gay.” Fadoul’s vibraphone here creates a low, “ringing” sound, as if to mimic the ominous chiming of a bell, a possible reference to the line from Donne’s “Death Be Not Proud,” which says “Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee,” a line of particular significance in relation to the AIDS epidemic and the gay community in particular. Snapping out of his thoughts of death with a sudden crescendo, the speaker abruptly ends the song with thoughts of motion and transit. In this final passage of “L’Heure Bleue” Alexander makes use of wordpainting, taking her cue from the text’s “did she ever say to herself ‘move on!’ / to where what zone name it I’ll go there quick / dapplelight moves on” to conclude with a rapidly moving crescendo, its speed bringing to mind our own hurtle toward the end of the age.

It is with “Parade” that the tensions built up through “Lemon Drops” and “L’Heure Bleue”—the swirling anxieties of old and new, of desire versus consequence—finally come to a head, and ultimately resolve. As the speaker watches a gay pride parade, he is unable to shake his obsession with these tensions, which ultimately serves as a cathartic expression for his own conflicts, artistic and otherwise. The opening description of the spectacle of the parade is punctuated by lively vibraphone playing by Fadoul, whose music interjects after every line in the first stanza, creating an interplay of discordant beauty. Later stanzas hint at the speaker’s earlier struggles with his own sexuality, and the bass and vibraphone play quietly, putting the full emphasis onto Lalli’s delivery. The speaker then turns to thoughts of his mother as she appeared in his childhood. As he drifts back into his memories, saying “I remember the pillow she leaned into / her reclining posture symbolized intellection and repose / qualities I yearned for,” the bass takes on the high pitch of a violin, sounding artful and civilized. With “qualities I yearned for,” the bass shifts into the pinging, special-effect sounds heard in “Lemon Drops,” which here once again signal the conflict between the artistic past, in the form
of his mother’s intellectualism, and the shortcomings of his own artistic endeavors. After dwelling on the loss of John, a former lover or friend who died of AIDS, the speaker turns his reflections inward, asking himself “why do I want to be a poet?” His rarefied place in time forces the speaker to justify his position; surely nothing insignificant will survive the millennium’s turn. It is through this post-modern self-awareness of his existence as a poet that the speaker finally finds the confidence to write for himself, as Lalli’s exuberant delivery declares, “I want to live! inside my body while I have the liberty / … I want the pleasure! of inhabiting my lovely body / before it decays.” The passion is reflected in the steadily growing music which culminates with all the performers once more banging on the bass and alternating lines, this time concluding with the triumphant “I should be experiencing joy!!!” A brief postlude follows in which the instruments and vocal delivery alike grow quiet, savoring the beauty of the final lines: “two bodies curled into each other / one retreating / the other advancing.”

“Lemon Drops” is a thorough and hopeful exploration of the challenges of the post-modern era, and Alexander’s witty and innovative instrumentation, and inventive use of the bass in particular, are an ideal musical expression for the poetry of “Lemon Drops.” While the atonal nature of this new piece is not always immediately pleasing to the ear, its discordance is highly appropriate for the work’s themes of artistic and personal anxiety and frustration. In creating a harsh beauty out of the chaos, Alexander’s neo-eclectic piece has performed the ultimate post-modern act of piecing together an existence from fragments of the past.