**Peter Schmidt**

**Tips for listening to words and music together**

Here are 3 basic things to listen for with the words and music of a song. None require specialized musical knowledge. Each heightens a composer’s and a singer’s expressive interpretation of a song, giving it both stronger emotions and a distinctive cadence or rhythm that’s part of the “meaning” we take away from listening to words and music together.

In my own experience, I find that with an unfamiliar song it takes awhile to learn to listen to words and music *together*; often I need to concentrate on just the music, or just the words. If that’s your experience, that’s fine. In any case, I recommend listening to all songs several times. Focus on the musical effects; then focus just on the words; then listen to the song trying to connect the two together. If you’d like to take brief written notes on things you like about the song (or moments that confuse you), do so—that will help your memory when we discuss the songs in our group.

Listen for:

1. A song’s **High and Low Notes.** Listen for what you think may be the song’s highest and lowest notes. Where do they occur? Are words being sung on these notes? If so, those words are being highlighted by the composer—why? Forte calls these notes respectively the apex and nadir notes.
2. **Beats**. Listen for moments in the song where the singer sings behind the beat, or ahead of it (i.e., slows down or speeds up). In some cases this can happen just briefly, for a word or a second or two; in other cases, a singer will suddenly sing much faster or much slower for quite awhile, making for a very dramatic effect. Rappers often use this technique even more frequently than singers. If you identify a few moments when you think this speeding up or slowing down occurs, ask yourself *why*. Such events emphasize particular moments in the song for dramatic effects—why did they choose the moments they did? How does this emphasis increase the drama and the emotions communicated to you by the song?
3. **Other markers** of emotion. Identify other distinctive ways besides the above two, in which the singer sings the song that you think make an important contribution to her or his interpretation of the lyrics and the music. Let’s discuss these: what do you hear, and how do you think these work? Try to listen to musical effects as they interact with a song’s lyrics.

Obviously analyses of musical effects and lyrics can get much more technical and much more detailed than this. I’m focusing just on the basics here. For good examples of more detailed musical and lyrical analyses, see the Forte pdf.

—Peter Schmidt