Dear Student,

Hi! My name is Dr. Elissa Harbert, and I am looking forward to being your First-Year Seminar professor and academic advisor for the coming year. Together, we'll explore the topic of “Imagining the Exotic in Western Music.” I’m excited to welcome you into our community in person soon, but I wanted to send you a note to help get you ready to start at DePauw, introduce myself, and tell you a little bit about what we’ll be doing in our class.

College is going to be an amazing time. It certainly was for me (I went to Lawrence University, a liberal arts college very similar to DePauw). You’ll meet all sorts of people from all around the world. You’ll make lifelong friends and begin to figure out who you are as a person, who you want to be, and what values and priorities are most meaningful to you. You’ll explore ideas and have new experiences you’ve never dreamed of. I hope that by starting your education here you will be beginning a lifetime of learning, growing, and living deeply, ready to face the world in all of its tangled complexities.

The First-Year Seminar program is like a semester-long friendly orientation to the overall university experience. Over the course of the semester, you will become more and more comfortable engaging ideas in class discussion, writing at a college level, and reading challenging but rewarding texts. You’ll start learning how to make good use of our wonderful libraries and other academic resources that will help you excel in your courses. You’ll develop more advanced study skills and self-discipline to help you manage your own life and experience, not to mention your grades. As your advisor, I’ll help you select courses, and we will talk about your goals, eventual choice of major, plans for internships or study abroad, and much else. Your first-year mentors, as well as a terrific staff who you’ll gradually get to know, will also be there to support you.

I’d like to tell you a bit about myself. I am a professional musicologist, sometimes known as a music historian, which means I study music in history and culture. I teach the full history of classical from the Middle Ages to the present, but I also teach courses in popular and folk music of the United States, musical theater, and more. My research focuses mainly on Broadway musicals, especially those about history, and I’m currently working on an article about Hamilton. We won’t be doing music performance in our class, but it will be conducted like a history course, with readings, papers to write, and class discussion. The biggest difference from a traditional history course is that we’ll have lots of music listening and viewing assignments, and we’ll integrate music into every day of the course. I’m starting my third year teaching at DePauw, and before that I taught at Macalester College in Minnesota and Northwestern University, where I got my PhD in Musicology. I am a lover of tiny little fluffy dogs, and I have two—Rondo and Fosse.

The course we’ll be embarking on is on the subject of exoticism and Orientalism in music. Basically, these are musical styles European and American composers have used to create the exotic aura of a foreign land in order to give audiences a sense of a desirable and often fearsome “Other” culture from Asia,
the Middle East, Africa, or South America. Instead of using authentic music from these cultures, composers have imagined sounds and styles that blend the strange with the familiar. Exoticist music has a long history in opera and instrumental music, but it doesn’t happen only in classical music; we’ll also listen for it in popular music, jazz, movies and TV, and even Broadway. For example, we’ll be looking at the Disney movie Aladdin, the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical The King and I, and songs by pop artists like Beyoncé (check out her song “Naughty Girl” on Spotify for a great example of musical exoticism!) Studying these exoticist musics and the ways non-white peoples are represented can give us a better sense of the history of power dynamics between the West and the rest of the world. Often these portrayals are deeply stereotyped and problematic, especially when considered through our contemporary understandings of race, gender, cultural appropriation, and global inequalities. However, they can also be staggeringly beautiful and have long been a beloved part of Western musical culture. I find everything about this topic to be fascinating, and I hope you will, too.

The first few weeks of college, indeed the whole first year, can be both daunting and supremely exciting. You’ll say goodbye (just for now!) to your family, get situated in your new room, and learn the ropes. It might all feel like a blur while it’s happening, but you’ll make memories you’ll treasure in years to come. If you have any questions before you arrive, please feel free to email me at elissaharbert@depauw.edu. I hope you enjoy the rest of your summer!

Sincerely,

Elissa Harbert, PhD
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