From an Interest to a Topic

> A topic is an interest specific enough to support research…[and] that helps others to advance their thinking and understanding. Start with what interests you most deeply. Nothing will contribute to the quality of your work more than your sense of its worth and your commitment to it. - *The Craft of Research*, pg. 36.[*]

General Questions: What piece of music have you recently conducted that really inspired you? What composers or pieces do you really love, or have you had a long-term interest in? Do you know a composer that you think should be better known? What conducting or repertoire question have you wanted answered recently? Is there a composer, piece, or body of repertoire that you know extremely well, perhaps better than anyone else?

After considering the questions above, create a list of three to five areas you are interested in:

1. _____   4. _____

2. _____   5. _____

3. _____

Which of the areas above has "the best potential for yielding a topic that is specific and that might lead to good sources of data?" (*The Craft of Research*, pg. 36)

If your topic is overly broad (i.e. Brahms's *Nänie*), you may need to narrow it. Ask yourself what aspect of your topic has been unexplored, or is of particular interest to you (i.e. Poetry and text setting in Brahms's *Nänie*).

From a Topic to Research Questions

> Once you have a topic to research, you should find in it questions to answer. Questions are crucial, because the starting point of good research is always what *you do not know or understand but feel you must*. Start by barraging your topic with question after question. - *The Craft of Research*, pg. 39.

For example, with the topic, "Poetry and Text Setting in Brahms's *Nänie*":

When did Schiller write the poem? When did Brahms first discover it? What is the meaning of Schiller's mythological references, and what appeal did this hold for Brahms? What is the poem's rhyme scheme and what compositional challenges did this present for Brahms? How does the structure of the poem relate to the structure of the piece, and what effect might understanding this have on musical interpretation?

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[*] The ideas in this worksheet are taken from Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research* (New York & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 35-47.

<u>In the space below take a moment to list four or five questions you have about your topic:</u>

Once you have a list of questions, begin organizing them into categories. Continuing with the Brahms example, categories that emerge might be: Background on Schiller and the poem itself, Brahms's motivation for setting the poem to music, Poetic analysis and interpretation, Interaction of poetry and music, etc.

Do you see any categories emerging from the questions you have asked about your topic? Try arranging your questions in multiple ways. This process may begin to give you an outline for your research project, provide direction for gathering and organizing information, and help focus your musical analysis.

From Questions to Significant Answers

> There is, though, one more step. It's a hard one, but if you can take it, you transform your project from one that interests you to one that makes a bid to interest others, a project with a rationale explaining why it is important to ask your question at all.
> - *The Craft of Research*, pg. 43

Determining the significance that your research might have for others is a crucial next step. *The Craft of Research* contains a simple, three-step process that assists writers in doing this.   It involves creating a summary statement consisting of three parts:

1. <u>I am researching (topic)</u>: poetry and text setting in Brahms's *Nänie…*
2. <u>Because I want to</u>: discover how Brahms might have viewed and understood the poem…
3. <u>In order to understand how (or why):</u>   his musical setting reflects Schiller's words, and the implications this might have for performance.

<u>Take a minute and try subjecting your topic to this process</u>. It will help clarify not only what interests you about it, but also the significance it may hold for your potential readers. Returning to this simple formula at different stages during your project is also a valuable exercise. It can help you maintain focus, as well as provide a reference point for how your ideas, thoughts and conclusions are evolving.

1. <u>I am researching (topic)</u>:

2. <u>Because I want to</u>:

3. <u>In order to understand how (or why)</u>: