

Guidelines for Writing Program Notes

Audience

Program notes should be for an average concert attendee. Technical terms should appear only if they are absolutely necessary. Program notes is to provide the members of the audience with information that will inform their hearing.

Content

Program notes should not be a laundry list of facts about the piece and the composer. It should focus on subject matter that is relevant to the performance in an orderly manner and avoid topics that are tangential.

Examples of appropriate topics

- How the piece came to be written
- The work's reception
- Any connection between the work and biographical details of the composer's life
- The musical form of the work
- The piece's programmatic elements if applicable
- Compositional techniques
- The relationship between music and the text if any
- Significance of the composition

Examples of inappropriate topics

- General information about the composer's biography which is not directly relevant to the piece
- Your personal feelings about the piece
- The technical challenges you experienced in preparing the piece
- Expressions of gratitude to teachers, friends, and relatives for support
- Your future goals or plans

Importance of Research

Program notes should be researched using reliable, authoritative sources, the same sources that you would consult for a formal research paper. Do not rely upon a single source. For some obscure compositions, be creative by expanding the parameters of your research to include sources that address the composer, the genre, or cultural/social/historical/political connections.

Where to Find Information

What you read on the Internet may not be true. Use reliable sources that are backed by proven experts and have been read and corrected by numerous other excellent scholars. Check the following sources as starting points:

- Oxford Music Online
- *New Grove's Dictionary of Music*
- *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*
- *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*
- Music history books such as *A History of Western Music*

Citations

While program notes must demonstrate the authority of your research, they are not formal scholarly papers. No citation is needed.

Details

Make sure to match the title of your piece in the program notes as it appears in the program.

See the following sources for further guidance:

<https://www.abrsm.org/resources/writingProgNotesApr05.pdf>

<http://simpson.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Program-Note-Guidelines.pdf>