

Program Note Observations

The **purpose** of program notes in college is threefold:

1. Program notes allow you to display your mastery of research and analytic techniques learned in history and theory courses;
2. Knowing the structure and history of your pieces (and the background of their composers) often improves your understanding of the works themselves—which can result in improved *performance* of those pieces; and
3. A set of well-written program notes can be invaluable in guiding your audience and helping them enjoy your program to the greatest extent; the notes prepare your audience to understand challenging works and build their anticipation of the musical treats in store for them. An enthusiastic audience also helps your performance; the notes can help to cultivate that enthusiasm. (Please re-read Bayne 7.2.)

When **starting** to work on the program notes, you begin by answering the following questions for each piece on your program:

1. What is the background of the piece and its composer? Why (and when) did the composer write it? What was happening in his/her life at the time? Are there interesting aspects to the composer's biography that you think an audience would like to know? *etc.*
2. What is the musical structure of the piece? What form is it? Does the form influence how you perform it? How does the accompaniment (if any) function within the piece? Are there particular musical elements (i.e. dissonance, syncopation, range, ostinato) that distinguish this work? *etc.*
3. What sells you on this piece? What do you like best about it? What would you particularly like a listener to go away remembering about the piece?

After you have answered all these questions for every work, you can take a step back and decide what are the most interesting things about each work—sometimes it will be historical aspects, while other times it may be a particularly beautiful accompaniment or melodic line. You can then write an effective paragraph or two that discusses the piece and makes the audience glad that they're going to get to hear it performed.

The actual **organization** of the program notes will vary, depending on your program. In some cases, it will make sense to group the works together by composer. Sometimes, there's a 'theme' to a group of pieces—they might all be works from Italy, or love songs, or humorous pieces—which would justify treating them as a group. Brainstorm with your advisor about what approach to take.

Historical Research

- A. Make an outline for yourself of the historical information you need to try to find for each piece.
 1. Composer's background (Obviously, if you have several pieces by one composer, do this once)
 - a. dates
 - b. training and career highlights
 - c. what s/he is known for
 - d. interesting anecdotes about the composer as a person
 2. Background of the piece
 - a. when written
 - b. why written
 - c. success of piece & its subsequent history

- d. interesting anecdotes about the piece
- e. published analyses of the piece
- (f. look for good translation if you are a singer)
- (g. plot if it is a theatrical work or a connected work like a song cycle)

B. Keep a list of the sources you consult

C. “OF COURSE” you will go to the *New Grove II* to begin your research, and will branch outward as necessary, using the research skills you learned in MU 320. No “Web-only” research!

D. You will *not* include all this information in your final notes—but you should know all these aspects about *every* piece you perform before presenting them to audiences.

Analysis

A. Make a template for yourself of analytical features to consider in your work (you could follow the model below if you wish; some of the following elements are not relevant to all pieces). “Fill out” the template for each piece in your program. I.e.,

1. Structural Elements

- a. form
- b. medium
- c. genre
- d. style
- e. musical era
- f. mood
- g. what do *all* the indications in the score mean?

2. Rhythmic Elements

- a. tempo
- b. meter
- c. subdivision
- d. syncopation?
- e. ostinato?
- f. special devices (*i.e.*, Scotch snap, dotted rhythms, swing)
- g. Articulation (staccato, legato)

3. Melodic and Harmonic Elements

- a. Mode
- b. Texture (monophony, etc.)
- c. Melody type (conjunct vs. disjunct)
- d. Proportion of Consonance/Dissonance

- e. 'Simple' or 'complex' harmony?
- f. Special devices (*i.e.*, sigh motive, suspensions, sequence)
- g. How would you describe the phrasing?
- h. Dynamic range

4. For Vocal Pieces

- a. Text setting
- b. What's it about?
- c. Word painting
- d. Voice type(s)
- e. Is there an accompaniment?
- f. What is the role of the accompaniment?

5. For Instrumental Works

- a. Is it programmatic? What's it about?
- b. Are all instruments used continuously in the work?
- c. Is there an accompaniment?
- d. What is the role of the accompaniment?

6. Other musical features of interest

B. Remember that our theory professors can help you if you are having trouble analyzing something.

C. You will *not* include all this information in your final notes—but you should understand all these aspects about *every* piece you perform before presenting them to audiences.

Personal Write-Up

You should be able to summarize in a sentence or two why YOU want to perform each piece on your recital. You may want to build on that idea for your notes; however, please avoid using the “first-person” voice in your notes unless it is *absolutely* essential.

Writing the Notes

With your historical research outline, your analysis outline, and your personal write-up close at hand, devise a short **combined outline** for each piece on your program. What historical facts do you want to include? What analytical details will help the listener comprehend the piece? What will help make the piece seem “special” to your audience, and will make them eager to hear it after reading about it?

Do **NOT** start to write until you have planned an outline!!

You always need to initiate your discussions with a “hook.”

"Composer X was born in 1816 in a small German village" is NOT a hook!!

What might be more engaging? (What would encourage your audience to keep reading?)

- **"Although composer X was born in a small German village in 1816, his career would lead him across fourteen countries and three continents."**
- **"It is unlikely that the residents of Geburtenstad, Germany, had any idea that a baby born in their village in 1816 would eventually become one of the world's finest sarrusophone composers."**

After your hook, you also are advised to discuss the background of your composer and the background of the work, leaving the musical discussion of your specific piece for last. This order of information seems to have the most natural “flow” to it; you should change the order only in extraordinary circumstances.

A couple of key facts that need to be in *every* program note about *every* piece: its date, the time period and/or cultural background of its creation or creator, and a sense of the piece’s structure (i.e., form).

We don’t customarily use footnotes in program note, but if you want to refer to someone else’s writing or idea, you can introduce the quoted or paraphrased information by identifying your source within your sentence. I.e.,

- As Michael Kelly—the singer who debuted the rôle—commented, “Mozart . . .”
- Alfred Einstein argues—in his biographical study of Mozart's life—that Constanze "had no sense of the fitness of things."
- Music historian Neal Zaslaw discovered that these pieces blend . . .
- Some writers, such as Alfred Einstein and Francis Carr, believe that Mozart’s relationship with his wife Constanze was detrimental to Mozart's well-being.

Should you have an overall “theme” to your notes, or should you treat each piece separately? That is up to you. Some people like to do groupings of pieces (which may already be reflected in the order of your program).