

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. (You will not use the same technical analytical terms for the audience as you used for yourself, of course.)

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, & info about the poet)
- (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 (identify where each section differs from the others, AND what distinguishes it)
- b. medium
- c. genre
- d. style
- e. musical era
- f. mood(s)
- g. what do *all* the indications in the score mean?

2. Rhythmic Elements

- a. tempo(s)
- b. meter(s)
- 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(s) & Key(s); changes?
- b. Texture(s) (monophony, etc.)
- c. Melody type(s) (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 (syllabic, neumatic, melismatic, mixture?)

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?

g. Rhyme scheme of poetry?

5. For Instrumental Works

a. Is it programmatic? What's it about?

b. Are all instruments used continuously in the work?

c. Are there “melody-only” instruments and “accompaniment-only”?

d. How would you describe the function of the accompaniment?

6. Other musical features of interest

7. What do you regard as the musical highlight?

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

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