

## WRITING PROGRAM NOTES

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### GREAT RESOURCES

*Music in Words: A Guide to Researching and Writing About Music* by Trevor Herbert; Oxford University Press, 2009.

*Writing About Music: A Style Sheet* by D. Kern Holoman; University of California Press, 2014.

Eric Booth's "Red Wheelbarrow Exercise":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iq0LXlosrOs&app=desktop>

### CONTENT AREAS

Types of information to include in program notes

- Remember, these notes are meant to enhance the LISTENING experience – provide the reader with something specific IN THE MUSIC that they can listen for (a quotation of another work, a recurring motive, a basic form, the use of instrumentation, a change in the style, etc.)
- Historical context is fine as long as it enhances the listening experience or allows the listener to have a new perspective
- Other things you can include: when the work was premiered and by whom; when premiered by THIS ensemble/soloist; length of the piece
- It is interesting to include one obscure piece of trivia about each piece, so those otherwise familiar with the composition can say "I didn't know that!"
- Avoid offering a "play-by-play" describing what is happening throughout the piece
- See PDQ Bach's rendition of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with narration for a humorous example of what not to do:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzXoVo16pTg>

### QUALITY RESEARCH

Best strategies for researching the pieces

- Good research is good research
  - Don't rely too heavily on one source
  - Don't rely too heavily on easily-accessed internet sources (anyone can look up Wikipedia)
- Liner notes are terrific resources. NAXOS online often provides liner notes

- Don't forget primary sources: Interview the composer/person who premiered the work
- But don't be afraid to offer your OWN original theories/observations/opinions

**STRUCTURE** Is there a certain format that you like to follow in your notes writing?

- Sometimes it is nice to tie all the pieces together with a recurring theme or thread. Not always possible depending on programming, but a nice idea to connect the pieces/find similarities between works
- Can begin and/or end with general commentary about the concert or the selection of the pieces on the program

**WRITING STYLE** What are your tips for writing style? Are there approaches you feel work best? Things to avoid?

- Record yourself talking casually about each piece – why did you select them? What do YOU like about each piece? Why are these pieces important? Why should anyone care if it gets performed? Transcribe the conversation and then edit to make them readable
- It is okay to have a casual tone in the program notes – you have permission to use “I”
- Don't try so hard to “write academically.” You can have an easy-to-read style and still maintain professional standards
- Write in nouns and verbs, not adjectives and adverbs; often, simple is better
- Edit, edit, edit, edit
- Watch for words that spell check might miss or auto correct might change – “Bach” gets changed to “Back”, “definitely” into “defiantly”, etc.
- Avoid jargon and passive voice!
- Don't identify Beethoven as a “famous composer” – everyone already knows that. Instead, give useful information as relevant to the piece
- Don't start off every paragraph/piece with the same opening sentence

**AUDIENCE CONSIDERATIONS** Adjust the writing style for different types of audiences

- Have three SPECIFIC people in mind for three different types of audiences –
  - Type 1: The enthusiastic novice. People who enjoy going to concerts, but have very little first-hand experience/knowledge of classical music. Imagine talking to your parents about the music – what would they want or need to know about the piece/composer/time period in order to enjoy the experience further?
  - Type 2: A reasonably well-educated music lover, perhaps someone who knows a bit about your instrument or subject material. Imagine talking to one of your students or your college roommate.
  - Type 3: The academic crowd. Imagine writing for or talking with your professor or a professional colleague – what do you want to demonstrate to him/her that you know about the music? What do you want HIM/HER to know?
- Do you need to define terms (e.g., vibrato, appoggiatura) or will your audience be insulted if you do? Do you need to identify people/time periods/styles?