I've been a program annotator for nearly 30 years—primarily for the Madison Symphony Orchestra, but also for many other orchestras and festivals. Nobody told me how to do this, and I have more or less learned "on the gig." Nearly all of us will end up writing notes at some point, however, so I have provided a few general guidelines. Where appropriate, I've linked some of my own notes or other websites as examples.

**What does a performer get out of writing program notes?**

While the main "consumer" of program notes is the concert audience, I have found that writing notes for the works I perform deeply enriches my playing experience. (Though it doesn't necessarily help you play the right notes…) Knowing the historical background certainly affects my "hearing" of the piece, but it is especially important to have studied and written about the musical form of the works I play. I have found it absolutely thrilling, for example, to sit on stage during a performance of Brahms's *Symphony No.1,* and hear the overall form work itself out. Trombonists of course get to sit and listen more than they play!

**What are program notes?**

A good set of program notes will do two essential things:

1) **Give the audience a sense of the work's history.** Traditionally, notes include the facts of a work's creation: the dates of composition and first performance, and where and by whom it was first performed. Some details of composer biography are usually appropriate. If you're dealing with a "big name" composer, you probably don't need to deal with who they are, but rather focus on the composition of that particular piece (see, for example, the notes on Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*). If it is a composer who is likely to be unfamiliar to most of the audience, however, it is perfectly appropriate to include a brief biography (see for example, notes on a work by the Swiss composer Frank Martin on the same MSO program).

2) **Give the audience a sense of what to expect while hearing the piece.** My own analyses have become much less detailed in the last 25 years. I still use technical designations for various forms--sonata form, rondo, passacaglia, etc.—but I try to be careful to define the term for my readers, or to make it apparent in the ensuing paragraph what the elements of the form are. I think that for most audience members, key is a meaningless concept, or at least one that makes no conscious difference to their experience of this piece. I therefore seldom mention specific keys in my notes, as interesting as they might be to me as a musician. As an annotator, I generally try to experience the piece as an interested audience member would: thus I am much more likely to listen to a recording a few times than to study a score. Like a good "tour guide," you point out the overall form of the piece, describe the character of various parts, and point out interesting features along the way. In some cases, the composer him/herself has given written notes on the piece. The "easy way out" is simply to quote those, but many annotators will incorporate composer comments into their own writing.
Format, Length, and Style

Actually the two elements given above are a nice general outline for most program notes: start with information on the composer and the history of the piece, and work your way towards the piece itself. See, for example, my notes for Bruckner's Symphony No.7. This is a fairly long note (it's a big piece), but follows this format: in opening paragraphs I talk about Bruckner's career and his symphonies, moving more specifically to the composition and reception of the seventh. The last four paragraphs summarize what happens in the work's four movements.

There is no set length for program notes...aside from the ones I'm assigning you to write for my class! I know that I almost always end up writing more than my orchestras want to publish: by the time I'm finished, my notes for a kind of typical symphony (overture + concerto + symphony or other large orchestral work) are often 2500-3000 words. I usually edit them to about around 2000 words for the printed program, which seems to be relatively standard. This is probably still quite a bit longer than you need for a recital or a chamber music program, or a public school music concert. Generally a page or two in the program (say 400-1000 words) is adequate.

This is not a research paper: program notes should avoid stiff and formal "academic" language. It is not necessary to cite authors unless you are using a direct quote, though if I am summarizing a great deal of material from a single book or article, I tend to give the author an informal citation.

Keep in mind that you're writing for a group of interested and generally well-educated people (who may not know much about musical terminology) rather that for a bunch of musicians. I try to strike a fairly conversational tone, and leave all of the musicological jargon and pomposity at home. (When I refer back to notes I wrote a quarter century ago, I am often struck by how darn "important" I was trying to sound...and how unappealing that is to read!)

Plagiarism

It's just as reprehensible in program annotation as it is any other form of writing. In this age of endless stuff available on line, there is a real temptation to simply cut and paste material from several online sources, or worse yet, to simply lift someone's program notes and present them as your own. I have caught a few occasions where someone did this to me, and I shudder to think of how many times it's happened without my knowledge. (One of my main motivations for putting up this page was reading a program note by a UWW student that was simply copied and pasted from the first website found in a Google search.) Bear in mind that anytime you do this, you are stealing—intellectual theft is no different than any other kind. It is taken for granted, however, that program notes are going to be a summary of information from elsewhere in your own words, unless you're using a direct quote. This kind of writing is obviously not held to the same standard of "showing your work" as a research paper, but that doesn't excuse simply ripping off someone else's text and passing it off as your own.

Texts and Translations

I'm pretty fussy about translations of vocal texts. "Singing" translations (i.e., those translations often included under the original text in vocal scores) are generally worthless to an audience member who really wants to make sense of what's being sung. I try to find idiomatic English translations -- that is, translations that convey the sense of the original language without worrying about rhyme or "singability." If you're lucky, you'll find a suitable translation in the score, on a liner note, online, or in a reference book. I think that, especially if you will be singing the work you are writing about, you should
look very closely at translations, and not be afraid to puzzle out something that is idiomatic, even if it is a language you don't know well. As an annotator and as an audience member, I always like the format where a line-by-line translation appears next to the original text. If printing costs allow, I usually like to provide texts for works sung in English as well. Not to be snippy or anything, but I've been to plenty of programs where Classically-trained singers or choirs were singing English texts that might as well have been in Urdu or ancient Mesopotamian for all the sense I could make of the words. Having the text always enriches my experience as an audience member, even if a singer's English diction is flawless!

Sources

Here are a few suggested sources of information...

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians - Your source of first resort. Grove is the standard English-language dictionary of music, with thoroughly authoritative, and fairly up-to-date articles written by recognized experts. Most university and larger public libraries have a copy and/or access to Oxford Music Online. [Hutchins] Library has the 29-volume paper version, but also has the online version, which you can access from any on-campus machine, or off-campus using your [Berea network] password and username. [Note: Grove Music Online through Oxford Music Online is a subscription service, so don't expect to find it in a general online search: you generally have to be working in a library or associated with a campus that has a subscription.] For more obscure composers, this is probably the easiest and most complete source of information. For well-known composers (Mozart, Brahms, etc.) it can be a quick check on dates of composition and first performance, as well as a valuable source for the biographical background on a piece.

David Daniels, Orchestral Music: A Handbook - The standard listing of major orchestral works, and part of the working tools of any orchestra librarian. The latest printed edition—the fourth edition of this venerable reference work—was published in 2005, and it has since moved to an online format, accessible by subscription only. This is not a complete listing of orchestral works, but covers most works that are published and generally available, with instrumentation, duration, and sometimes with movement-listings. The Daniels book come in handy in several ways—e.g., figuring out which of multiple versions of a single piece you're writing about. [Reference 780.016 D186o 2005]

Composer biographies - Just cruise the [780.92's in Hutchins Library]! In general, the newer the better. There are also books specifically on the works of major composers. I like the old BBC pocket-size guides and there are the more substantial Cambridge guides to specific works.

Liner notes - You'll of course want to listen to the piece, so take a look at the CD liner notes -- generally somewhat more authoritative than notes you may find at random in an online search.

Notes on the score - Some scores will include quite bit of information about the piece: sometimes a program note by the composer, or an indication of who commissioned the work and when it was first performed. Concert Band repertoire is particularly generous in this respect--with the educational market in mind, band composers often provide quite extensive descriptions.

Published collections of program notes - Many of the finest program annotators have published collections of their notes, often covering a host of "standard" compositions. Check out the MT125's in both the reference collection and the main stacks upstairs. A few selected sources of notes for orchestral music are:

- Donald Francis Tovey's six-volume Essays in Musical Analysis. [780 T736e] A real classic in this form. Tovey's program notes, in most cases written over a century ago, probably wouldn't fly with today's audiences: his literary style is pure turn-of-the-century Edwardian English, and
he presumes a depth of musical knowledge that most audiences today do not have. But his outlines of form are always a good place to start.


- Michael Steinberg, *The Symphony: A Listener's Guide* [784.218 S819s]. *The Concerto: A Listener's Guide* [e-book]. *Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide* [782.5 S819c 2005] and as an e-book. Steinberg, longtime annotator of the San Francisco Symphony (also New York & Boston) is one of my favorite annotators to read. His notes are exhaustively researched, often incorporating some of the latest musicological work, and always well-written and enjoyable. These three books collect his notes in three broad genres.

- D. Kern Holoman, *Evenings with the Orchestra*. Holoman wrote most of these notes for the Sacramento Symphony Orchestra and the University of California - Davis. Thoroughly well-written and intelligent. Holoman is occasionally opinionated but always readable. [Note: While Hutchins does not have this particular title, we do have Holoman’s *Writing About Music: A Style Sheet From the Editors of 19th-century Music* [e-book].]

- *All Music Guide to Classical Music: The Definitive Guide to Classical Music*. Huge collection (something like 800 pieces) of program notes and other essays...in teeny, tiny print! The quality of the individual notes varies considerably, but they are generally well-researched and fact-checked. Most of the AMG notes are also available online. [Note: I have found this site less helpful than the author seems to infer. –SKH]

**Online searches - Important:** Though I do quite a bit of my program notes research online these days, I always consult New Grove or another authoritative source whenever possible as a "fact check." Several strategies and resources I've found handy:

- Many orchestras or annotators make program notes available online. Finding them can be hit-or-miss, but I usually have good luck with a Google search for "Composer - Significant Word from the Title - program note". **Hint:** for someone like Mozart, you're obviously not going to want to search for "symphony" but instead by K number or key.].

- I will admit to using Wikipedia fairly often—especially to check information on non-musical historical background. There are increasing numbers of Wikipedia articles dedicated to single pieces. Handy, but just using like the rest of the web, check your facts carefully. And why would you use Wikipedia if you have access to Grove?

- You may also run across extensive sites devoted to a single composer. Some of these are "fan" sites—fun reading, but sometimes not particularly useful stuff. In other cases, you can find information that is generally authoritative. A great example is the wonderful Bach Cantatas Website. Many contemporary composers have their own websites, or have them maintained for them by publishers: see for example, the useful site for the composer Eric Ewazen.

**Those things hanging on either side of your head** - You are a trained musician writing for an audience that is almost certainly less aware of the nuances of a composition than you are. If you are writing about a piece that you are performing or conducting, you can seldom go wrong by discussing what you hear as interesting or significant about a composition

Comments on this page are welcome -- just send me a note at allsenjm@charter.net.

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