

**Writing Concert Program Notes:
A Guide for UWW Students
by Prof. J. Michael Allsen
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I've been a program annotator for over twenty years now--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 Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*](#)). 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 to Groven's *Hjarlarljod*](#)).

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 twenty 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. Take a look, for example the [notes I recently](#)

[wrote for Rorem's *Mallet Concerto*](#)-- an atypical and challenging case, since we did the world premiere of the work, and there was of course no recording. What I had to do for this piece was to translate from the experience of reading the score to what the concerto will sound like to an audience member.

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 Chavez's *Sinfonia India*](#). Here, the first three paragraphs give a little information on the composer and discuss the details of the work's composition. The fourth paragraph discusses the instrumentation, which is a point I found particularly interesting about this piece. The final paragraph briefly describes the music of the *Sinfonia India*.

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 1600-1800 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. See for example, the [notes on Walton's first symphony](#), where I drew heavily on a newly-published biography and gave the author a nod. 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 than for a bunch of musicians. I try to strike a fairly conversational tone, and leave all of the musicological jargon and pomposity at home.

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 notes 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. (see, for example, the [translations I did for a recent MSO holiday program](#)) 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* - Your source of first resort. 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.

Composer biographies Just cruise the ML410's in the Andersen 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. One of my favorites is Donald Francis Tovey's six-volume *Essays in Musical Analysis*. [MT90 .T6 E8 1959 - I'll put these on reserve.] Tovey's program notes, in some cases written over a century ago, are in a literary style that probably wouldn't fly with today's audiences, but his outlines of form are always a good place to start.

Online searches - 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 - notes" [Hint: for someone like Mozart, you're obviously not going to want to search for "symphony" but instead by K number or key.]. You may also run across extensive sites devoted to a single composer. Some of these are "fan" sites -- fun reading, but not particularly useful stuff. (One of my favorites is the [Gustav Mahler Virtual Shrine](#).) 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](#). Important: Though I do quite a bit of my program notes research online these days, I always consult *New Grove* or another authoritative paper source whenever possible as a "fact check."

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