

The Lost Art of Program Notes

by **Ryan Fogg**

I am a very punctual person. In fact, I live by the adage, “If you’re not five minutes early, you’re late.” Attending concerts is no exception. I like to arrive in plenty of time so I can find my seat and preview the printed program. I especially look forward to reading the program notes. However, in piano recitals today, the performer rarely has provided them for the audience. There could be several reasons for this. Some believe the music can speak for itself, and any additional description hinders the musical experience (similar to reading the “spoiler” before seeing the movie). Others consider program notes unnecessary if the works are not programmatic in nature. Some pianists prefer to speak more informally from the stage about each piece on the program. I like these presentations, but when my students choose this approach, I insist they write it out rather than speak “off the cuff!”

I do not believe program notes are necessary for a successful performance, but I do believe they are helpful in educating audiences about the origins of the repertoire, the style characteristics, and, most importantly, what to listen for in the performance. If a musical performance is a form of communication, then program notes can be viewed as a form of translation, beneficial even for non-programmatic works, since a discussion of musical elements is not limited to extra-musical associations.

A few years ago I programmed Chopin’s *Sonata in B minor* on a recital and included notes for the audience. Several months later, a man who was unable to attend the recital told me how much he had enjoyed my program notes on the Chopin! (Someone had given him a program.) I thought to myself, “. . .he wasn’t even there!” Yet my program notes communicated something my performance could not, and as a result, he developed a deeper insight into a wonderful piece of music.

Each semester I require my students to write program notes for every piece they study, regardless of whether they are giving a recital or not. The notes do not have to be elaborate; a few informative sentences are sufficient. When I first made the assignment, the students did not know where to begin, so I developed a list of guidelines for them to follow. I hope other teachers and students will also find them helpful.

A Guide for Writing Program Notes

1. **Know your audience.** Imagine that the person reading the notes is educated enough about music to carry on a conversation. In other words, write intelligently without trying to sound impressive. Some may believe program notes should be comprehensible to all, regardless of background or education. I understand this, but I encourage a more scholarly approach for my students.

2. **Use complete sentences.** Avoid short ones. Like this. And try really, really, really hard to avoid run-on sentences, because they seem to go on forever without much of a break, and before you know it, you've lost the reader's attention, or did you ever have it in the first place?

3. **Correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar are expected** of course, but I have read enough poorly written program notes that it warrants mentioning. "Writing across the curriculum" has become a staple in higher education. What better way to develop your students' writing skills than to have them write about the music they practice for hours every day?

4. **Discuss facts that are both relevant and interesting.** There are probably many interesting facts about the composer, but include comments related to the specific piece you are playing. For example, it may be interesting to know that Scriabin died from an infected boil, but it has nothing to do with his piano music. On the other hand, discussing Schumann's dual personality would be worthwhile because mood swings are evident in his compositions.

5. **Avoid exaggerated generalizations.** Program notes need to be based more on fact than opinion. While Mozart may be your favorite composer, writing that "Mozart was the greatest musical genius of all time" is a bit over the top, even if some others agree with you.

6. Try to consider at least three of the following elements in your discussion:

Genre: What type of piece is it? Does it stand alone, or is it part of a set?

Origin of the piece: Are there special circumstances surrounding its origin?

Its significance in the piano literature: Why is this piece important? Or is it?

Form/structure: Sonata form? Rondo? ABA? Is there a climactic moment?

Style: What is its style period? What features indicate this?

Texture: Homophonic? Polyphonic?

Harmony: Are the harmonic progressions traditional or more adventurous?

Sources

Use standard musical reference resources to prepare the program notes:

The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians

Guide to the Pianist's Repertoire, Maurice Hinson

The Art of the Piano, David Dubal

A History of Keyboard Literature, Stewart Gordon

Music for Piano: A Short History, F. E. Kirby

Wikipedia : <http://www.wikipedia.org/> (be sure your articles are verifiable!)

As you do your research, remember that program notes should not merely consist of quotations from sources. The purpose of this assignment is to develop your writing skills, not to copy someone else. If you find a quotation you want to use, be sure to cite the origin.

Included are program notes I wrote for a recital in 2007. By no means exhaustive, they call attention to the main characteristics of each work.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was a master of capturing the essence of emotional expression in the short character pieces for piano, a genre he helped develop in the first half of the nineteenth century. While most of Schumann's character pieces were grouped into sets, the *Arabeske*, composed in 1839, was published separately. Musically, the term "arabeske" is defined as "a piece that uses a decorative design of florid material" (Hinson). Here, the florid material is written in a cantabile (singing) style, yet maintains a very poetical quality. The piece is in rondo form with two contrasting episodes and a final coda.

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) is perhaps best known for his string quartets and symphonies; however, he made a substantial contribution to the piano literature with his fifty-two piano sonatas. (In more recent years, some Haydn authorities cite sixty-two sonatas.) Although Anthony van Hoboken catalogued the *Sonata in C Major* as No. 50, his order is not consistently chronological. This sonata is probably the last sonata that Haydn composed (ca. 1794-1795) and it represents his mature classical style. The opening motive of the first movement can be heard throughout in various guises. An intriguing feature of this movement is the composer's pedal markings that create an intentionally blurred effect in two instances: the first across two measures in the development, the second across four measures in the recapitulation. (These two are Haydn's only pedal indications in all the sonatas.) The second movement is exquisite in its combination of cantabile melody with improvisatory figuration. The brief finale creates a humorous effect with its frequent pauses and abrupt modulations, serving as a brilliant closing to the work.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) developed a very individualistic approach to piano composition, combining percussive treatment of the instrument with elements of lyricism, strong dissonance, and insistently driving rhythms. Marked *Allegro tempestuoso*, the third sonata was composed in 1917 based on earlier sketches from 1907. In a single movement, it is an expanded sonata-allegro form. The bravura of the piece is evident from the opening, yet yields to contrasting lyricism as the work unfolds. The composer's extended use of percussive dissonance in this work is tempered by his neo-classical bent toward traditional tonal relationships and regular phrase structures.

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) composed more than 550 keyboard sonatas, with almost all in one-movement, binary form (two repeated sections). Since Scarlatti was himself a virtuoso at the keyboard, multiple technical challenges—including wide leaps, repeated notes, trills, glissandos, and hand crossings—abound within his sonatas. However, the *Sonata in B Minor*, K. 27 is not as virtuosic as many of his other works.

The beauty of this sonata lies primarily in its expressive harmonic palette and exploration of colorful sonorities.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) composed the *Sonata in B Minor* in 1844, and it stands today as one his masterpieces. Structurally, this work is quite traditional with the forms of each movement closely related to the eighteenth-century sonata. The ingenuity of the sonata lies in its masterful juxtaposition of pianistic virtuosity and intensity with a sublime and profound expression. In the first movement, the opening thematic material, somewhat introductory in its character, does not appear again in the recapitulation. The second theme is more prominent, closely resembling a nocturne, and later signals the arrival of the recapitulation. The seemingly disparate components of this movement require great flexibility of tempo, but the freedom must be exercised so that its unity is preserved. This movement, along with the finale, concludes in the parallel key of B major. The scherzo movement features continuous right-hand figuration in its opening section (in the key of E-flat major), followed by a more nostalgic trio, and an exact return of the opening section. The slow movement is also in ternary form. The primary section is melodic in its presentation, while the middle section has much greater harmonic prominence. In fact, some of the more inspiring moments of the entire sonata come from the exploration of sonorities evident in this section. The return near the end is slightly varied. The finale features a virtuosic display of ever-increasing tension as one section leads seamlessly into another in the familiar sonata-rondo form. Upon each return of the A section, the rhythmic values in the left-hand accompanying figure increase: first in triplets, then in quadruplets, finally in sextuplets. The endurance of the pianist is ultimately tested as the climactic coda approaches, thereby contributing to the already exhilarating nature of the ending.

I believe it is our privileged responsibility as performers to inform audiences about what they are going to hear. As teachers, it is our duty to pass this responsibility on to our students so they will continue this tradition. I encourage you and your students to add this element of communication/translation to your performances. Who knows, you may also give an overly punctual person something to read prior to curtain.

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