

How to Write about Music: Vocabulary, Usages, and Conventions

Some Basic Performance Vocabulary

Here are a few terms you will need to use in discussing musical performances; surprisingly, some of these are often misused.

Composition, piece, and work: These terms may all be used, more or less interchangeably, for a single or complete piece of music. (The first composition on the program was very short;" "The second piece was the one I enjoyed the most" or "This is a contemporary work.")

Song: This is a relatively brief work for a solo singer, which is not part of a larger work like an opera or an oratorio (though it may be part of a song cycle, and the term is also correct for a solo passage in a musical comedy or an operetta). Note that *song* should **not** be used for an instrumental work, or for an aria.

Aria: This is a passage for a solo singer in an opera or oratorio. If it is being performed out of context, as part of a concert or recital, it is still referred to as an *aria*. Some arias are independent compositions; these are called *concert arias*.

Vocal, vocalist: Vocal means *of the voice*; it is redundant and therefore incorrect to speak of a "vocal song." *Vocalist* is simply a synonym for singer.

Choral, chorus: *Choral* means *choir* (thus a choral work is a work for choir), and a chorus is a relatively large choir, or group of singers.

Ensemble: This can refer to any group of performers, but it is most commonly used for smaller groups. (A large group would be referred to as, say an *orchestra*, *chorus*, or *band*.)

Chamber music: This refers to any music written for a chamber ensemble—a string quartet, a piano trio, a brass quintet, a woodwind quintet, a chamber orchestra, and so on. (Music for a soloist, or for a soloist with accompanist, may or may not be chamber music.)

Symphony: This is a composition for orchestra, usually in four movements. The term should not be used as a short form of "symphony orchestra" (the term to use in that case is *orchestra*.)

Concert Etiquette:

If possible, arrive at the concert hall at least fifteen minutes before the performance, so that you may relax and read *the program notes*. (Although you may refer briefly to the program while the performance is in progress, reading it steadily will distract you from the music is considered poor manners.) Bear in mind, too, that at many concert halls, latecomers are not allowed to take their seats until some logical break in the music occurs.

During the performance, audience members are expected to remain silent; absolute silence helps the performers to concentrate and enhances the emotional intensity of the musical experience. Performers can be distracted by talking, coughing, humming, or incidental noise—which will also distract and annoy other audience members.

If you are expected to report on the concert, you will naturally want to take some notes. However, you should resist the temptation during the actual performance. Instead, to increase your own enjoyment of the music, and to avoid disturbing those sitting near you, write your notes between compositions or between movements, or during the intermission.

At the concert or recital, the audience expresses their enthusiasm by applauding at the *end* of a work. If a work has more than one movement, audiences do not customarily applaud between movements. At an opera, however, audiences often applaud at the end of arias, duets, and ensembles.

Taking photographs and using recording equipment are *usually not permitted* at either concerts or operas.

***After the Concert:**

Within a few days after the concert, you may possibly be able to find a review of it in one of the local newspapers. You will find it interesting to compare your own ideas about the performance with those of the reviewer or reviewers.

Transforming Your Notes into a Report:

You should plan to expand your notes into a complete report very soon after the concert—the same evening or during the next day or so.

It is often helpful to begin with an outline and then to write a rough draft. Next, polish and edit your draft to produce the final version. Remember to check your grammar, and the spellings of names (especially foreign names) and musical terms.

Below are recommendations for the actual content of your report—*what* to write. Following that, there is a section on vocabulary and usages, or conventions, involved in referring to musical works—that is, *how* to write about music.

What to Write: The Content of a Report

You should begin your report with a brief description of the concert attended, including the name and the type of the performing group or soloists, the place, the date and time, and the music you heard.

You will also want to note whether the performers were attempting a historically “authentic” program. For example, in music by Johann Sebastian Bach, was a harpsichord (rather than a piano) used? For a symphony by Haydn or Mozart, was the size of the orchestra reduced? Did the performers use old instruments, or reconstructions of old instruments?

Following the introduction, the paper might focus on the pieces you enjoyed the most, your reaction to the performance and performers.

In conclusion, you may want to describe your general reaction to the concert. Did you enjoy it? Was there anything special about this performance? Did this concert make you feel like going to other concerts in the near future?

Individual Compositions:

In discussing individual compositions, you will probably want to cover some of the following points.

- *Musical styles*—how did the composition correspond to what you have learned about the stylistic period in which it was composed—Baroque, Classical, etc.? Your appreciation of a work is often enhanced when you recognize its musical style.
- *Musical genres and forms*—what was the genre of the piece—symphony, concerto, tone poem, string quartet, étude, etc? What musical form was employed—theme and variations, sonata form, ABA, etc? If you are reporting on an opera, you might note arias, recitatives, ensembles, choruses, acting, scenery, etc.
- *Program music*—was the composition program music—that is, was it inspired by a text, story, or place? If so, how did the music reflect the program?
- *Emotions, images, and ideas*—did the composition evoke in you specific feelings or thoughts? For an opera, you should describe how the music depicted mood, character, and dramatic action.
- *Memorable features*—what features of the piece were the most memorable—for example, did you tend to remember the slower, lyrical sections; or the triumphant parts; or fast, exciting parts? Were there any striking melodies, and rhythms? Were there any unusual vocal, instrumental, or electronic effects? Were there certain performers that impressed you or disappointed you?
- *Musical themes*—were there several contrasting sections or themes within a movement? Did you recognize variations of a particular themes or reappearances of musical ideas or movements?
- *Comparisons with other works*—it is often illuminating to compare a work with other works on the program, or with other works you have studied, noting similarities and differences.

Performance – Your discussion of performance will be of a more subjective nature. You may want to focus on the following points:

- *Emotional projection*: Did you think that the soloist or group succeeded in projecting the emotional meaning of the work?
- *Dynamics*: Did the dynamics seem to have enough variety and flexibility? Did anything seem too loud or too soft?

- *Program* – A word with several meanings: (1) an entire concert or recital (“I enjoyed tonight’s program”). (2) The printed booklet given to the audience members at a concert, opera, recital, etc. (“I found the reading of the program notes helped me understand the music”). (3) A literary text, a place, an event, or the like, on which a musical composition is based (Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique has an autobiographical program”).
- *Performance* – This term typically refers to the actual act of making music (“a virtuoso performance”), though it is sometimes used to mean a musical presentation (“The performance consisted of six works”).
- *Concert, recital* – A *recital* is a program by a soloist or by two performers (soloist and accompanist, or duo). A concert is a program by a chamber ensemble, orchestra, band, or chorus; there are also rock, jazz, and pop concerts.
- *Production* – This is a performance of a work that involves staging—costumes, scenery, etc.—as well as music. The term may also refer to the costumes, scenery, and so on, as distinct from the music (“The opera was well sung, but the production seemed over elaborate”).
- *Show* – This term is properly used only for popular music and musical comedy.
- *Act, scene* – In opera, operetta, and musical theater, an act is a major section of the work (“The third act of Rigoletto includes the famous Quartet”); usually, an intermission takes place between acts. Acts may be subdivided into *scenes*. Note: In popular forms like revues and variety shows, act refers to the presentation of one of the performers or performing groups (“a tough act to follow”); but the term is not correctly in this way for recitals, orchestra or chamber concerts, etc. (Don’t say, “For his second act he sang Die Forelle.” Rather, say, “The second piece he sang was Die Forelle”; or, “The second work was Die Forelle”).
- *Movement* – This is a specifically designated part of a long work like a symphony, a concerto, a string quartet, etc. (The term is not used for sections within an opera.)
- *Section, passage* – These terms are useful for referring to parts of a composition shorter than a movement or (in a musical drama) shorter than an act, scene, aria, duet, ensemble, etc.
- *Tempo* – What tempos were used? Did you think the tempos sounded right, or did some parts seem too slow or too fast? Could you identify any times when the performers intensified their expression of the music by using *rubato*—a slight holding back or pressing forward of the tempo?
- *Melodies* – Did you think that the melodic lines were projected with a feeling of forward motion, lyricism, continuity, and climax? Did there seem to be a good balance between main melodic lines and accompaniment?

- *Vocal and instrumental performances* – Did the singers seem to have outstanding voices? Did the instrumentalists seem to be producing beautiful sounds? Did the performers' body motions add to or detract from the musical effect?
- *The parts and the whole* – Did you enjoy the give-and-take among various instrumental families (in an orchestra or band), voice parts (in a chorus), or soloists (in a chamber ensemble)? In a concerto, did the soloist and orchestra seem to be well coordinated?
- *The conductor* – Did you get the impression that the conductor had the ensemble under control? Did the conducting gestures and motions seem to be conveying the feeling of the music?
- *Opera* – How would you describe the quality of the opera production? Were the sets, costumes, lighting, etc., appropriate and aesthetically pleasing? Was the opera sung in its original language or in translation? If it was sung in translation, could you understand the words? Were subtitles provided, and if so did you find them helpful?
- *Disasters* – Performances, including those by famous musicians, do occasionally run into problems. Since professionals are good at "covering" slips, even quite sophisticated audience members may not be unaware that anything has gone wrong; still, you may want to ask yourself some questions like the following: Did the performers seem to have a firm technical command of the music? Did they consistently play or sing in tune? Do you think you heard any "wrong notes?"