

## Preparation Guide for Program Notes

Program notes are designed to engage your audience in the music that you will perform and help them to contextualize the work. They should be written for a general audience, so avoid the type of technical terms or comments that you would use in a regular research paper. In writing your program notes, you should consider the following topics. Please note that you should not feel compelled to address all topics. You want to avoid writing program notes that sound like a collection of facts; instead, create a focus for the notes:

- a. **Program theme:** focus on what brings the program together thematically and explain how each piece fits that theme, rather than addressing each piece separately. This is a very effective strategy for program notes as it challenges the writer to think about the program as a whole and how the pieces relate to one another.
- b. **Context of the work:** When was it written? What was happening in the composer's life and career during that time? Are there significant events happening in the wider world that should be taken into consideration (i.e. wars, political strife, etc.)? What else can you say about the circumstances surrounding the composition of a work?
- c. **Composer's intent:** What do you know about why the composer wrote the work? Was it commissioned? If so, by whom and for what? Was it inspired by something or someone in particular? This can be tricky to answer so avoid speculation.
- d. **Reception history:** If the work has gathered meaning from its performance and reception history, this is usually important to talk about.
- e. **What makes the work unique:** Does it defy genre expectations? Does it use unusual instrumental combinations? How does it fit into the composer's oeuvre? Is it unusual in some way?
- f. **Musical characteristics:** If there are noteworthy musical characteristics that can be perceived by the average listener (e.g. "Listen for the drone in the third movement, which Haydn intended to sound like bagpipes.") but avoid providing a detailed theoretical analysis. Also avoid too many vague descriptive passages about how the music sounds, as this tends to be an ineffective way of communicating about music.

### Special cases:

- a. **The student has composed the program:** When a composer writes his or her own notes, typically the focus is on the inspiration for the pieces, as well as any stylistic influences.
- b. **A program with many short pieces:** Students typically write notes for a program of 2 to 4 pieces, so they write a stand-alone paragraph or two for each piece. If a program has several shorter pieces, it is more appropriate to focus on the overall theme of the program, as in suggestion "a" above. For example, is the program all piano works? Can you speak about the place of the various genres in the piano repertoire?