

RESEARCH ESSAY

The Programme Note as a Second Encounter: Writing for Curiosity Without Pre-Emptying Performance

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A programme note usually reaches the listener before the music and speaks in a peculiar future tense. It names what will be heard, assigns significance to selected events, and often supplies an emotional itinerary. The listener is told that a theme is ominous, a transition inevitable, a return transformed, or a finale redemptive before any such judgment can be made in sound. The note intends to help, yet its help may close the very curiosity that makes listening active. The question is not whether contextual writing belongs in the concert hall. It is when that writing should act and what kind of attention it should invite.

The conventional note combines compact biography, compositional circumstances, formal description, and evaluative assurance. Each element can be valuable. Dates establish chronology; a commission clarifies occasion; instrumentation directs attention to resources; formal vocabulary may let a listener retain a long span. Trouble begins when information becomes advance interpretation. A description of what a passage *does* can arrive as an instruction about what it *must mean*. The reader then listens to verify prose rather than to encounter an event whose consequence is still unsettled.

This temporal problem is often mistaken for a disagreement between experts and general audiences. In fact, all listeners bring concepts, memories, and expectations. Expertise changes their density, not their existence. Christopher Small's account of "musicking" treats performance as a field of relationships rather than a work delivered intact to passive recipients. Nicholas Cook likewise argues that music becomes meaningful in performance, where scores, bodies, conventions, and occasions interact. If meaning is enacted rather than merely transmitted, the programme note should not behave as a

parcel containing the correct experience.

The work concept nevertheless shapes the note's authority. Lydia Goehr shows how the modern concert tradition came to organize practice around regulative ideas of the autonomous musical work. The familiar note often reproduces that arrangement: a stable object is explained, and the performance becomes its temporary realization. This format can underdescribe decisions that are audible tonight—tempo, balance, articulation, acoustics, ordering, and the relation among performers and audience. Even a historically meticulous note can make the present performance seem curiously incidental.

A more useful model treats the note as two encounters rather than one. The first encounter, available before listening, offers orientation without verdict. It can identify the duration, ensemble, broad formal stakes, relevant access information, and two or three concrete questions. Which instrument first changes the direction of the texture? When does repetition begin to feel like return? Does the ending resolve an earlier tension or simply stop carrying it forward? Such questions do not require a novice to possess specialist language. They offer handles for attention while leaving the listener free to reject the premise.

The second encounter becomes available after the performance. It may occupy the reverse of a printed sheet, a clearly separated page, or an optional digital link. Here the writer can name precise moments, compare sources, explain contested readings, and discuss choices made in rehearsal. Retrospective reading changes the logic of explanation. The note no longer predicts the listener's response; it meets a memory that has already formed. Agreement, resistance, and surprise become possible because prose and experience now stand beside

one another.

This sequencing draws on a simple fact about musical time: later events revise earlier ones. Jonathan Kramer describes musical temporality as multiple rather than reducible to clock duration. A cadence may make a prior instability newly legible; a reprise can reveal what the opening withheld; the silence after a final sound belongs to the perceived form even though no new note occurs. Contextual writing should respect the same capacity for retrospective change. A note read after hearing may clarify without pretending that clarification was available in advance.

The two-encounter model also makes room for performance-specific knowledge. A conductor might briefly explain why an edition was chosen. A singer could identify a breath, consonant, or translation problem that reorganized a phrase. A composer might distinguish an invitation from a requirement. An instrument maker, sound engineer, or access worker could describe how the venue altered the realization. These voices should not be assembled as endorsements. Their value lies in showing that interpretation has labour, alternatives, and consequences.

There are risks. Separating contextual material may disadvantage listeners who want substantial preparation. The answer is choice, not prohibition. Pre-performance material can include a synopsis, text, translation, content note, and technical glossary where these are needed for access or comprehension. The crucial distinction is between information necessary to enter the event and an account that forecloses what the event can become. A listener should be able to select a short orientation, a full analytical essay, or no note at all without being ranked by that choice.

Opera makes the distinction especially clear. A synopsis can prevent confusion

about plot, while a sentence declaring the moral significance of an aria may flatten a character whose music exceeds the action. Translation is necessary for many listeners, but translation itself contains interpretation: register, rhyme, repetition, and ambiguity cannot all be preserved at once. Notes should acknowledge such decisions rather than present the translated line as transparent equivalence. Where a production relocates the action or changes a visible relationship, the note can state the intervention without prescribing its success.

Digital delivery creates both opportunity and danger. It permits layers, audio examples, larger type, screen-reader compatibility, and material in multiple languages. It also tempts institutions to replace a shaped note with an expanding warehouse of links. Gérard Genette's account of the paratext as a threshold remains useful here because thresholds organize passage; they are not simply piles of adjacent information [?]. A digital note needs a route, a hierarchy, and an end. It should say what is essential before the event, what is optional afterward,

and how long each element will take.

The writer's voice deserves reconsideration as well. Anonymous institutional prose often uses omniscience to conceal uncertainty: "the music depicts," "the composer intends," "the audience realizes." A signed note can distinguish evidence from inference. It can say that a letter documents one circumstance, the score supports several realizations, and the present reading emphasizes one of them. Lawrence Kramer's defence of interpretation is pertinent because interpretation gains force through argument, not through impersonating neutral description. The note becomes more trustworthy when its claims show their grounds and limits.

An effective post-performance note need not be long. One page can return to three moments and ask how their relation changed in memory. It can provide citations for readers who wish to continue, record a production decision, and preserve a disagreement that rehearsal did not settle. What matters is its orientation toward the listener's completed but still revisable encounter.

This approach also changes evaluation. Instead of asking only whether audiences found the note informative, an institution can ask when it was read, whether it changed what a listener noticed, and whether that change felt enabling or directive. Small pilot comparisons—front-loaded analysis, questions-only orientation, and post-performance commentary—could reveal how formats work for different repertoires and audiences. The aim would not be a universal solution, but evidence for editorial choice.

Programme writing is sometimes defended as mediation between difficult art and an uncertain public. That metaphor places the writer between two parties imagined as unable to meet. A second-encounter note takes a less anxious view. Music and listener have already met. The writer arrives afterward with context, counterpoint, and an invitation to listen again—in memory, in conversation, or at another performance. The note does not surrender expertise. It changes expertise from advance command into a companion for return.