Royal Academy of Music
Royal College of Music
Royal Northern College of Music
Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama

ASSOCIATED BOARD
OF THE ROYAL SCHOOLS OF MUSIC

Writing Programme Notes

A guide for diploma candidates

Nigel Scaife

Contents

Introduction

This guide has been written to give music diploma candidates some advice to help with the research, preparation and writing of programme notes for DipABRSM and LRSM exams in Music Performance and Music Direction. The writing of programme notes is an important part of these exams and reflects the fact that most performers and directors are asked at some point to write programme notes for a recital or concert. It also allows examiners to assess how well you understand the musical and historical context of the repertoire you are performing and provides a starting point for discussion in the Viva Voce. It is important to remember, though, that the programme notes are reviewed by the examiner during the exam and do not receive a separate mark but contribute to the overall mark given to the Viva Voce.

The importance of this task should not be underestimated, as informative and clearly presented notes can significantly enhance the listening experience of your audience. Many musicians find writing programme notes not just a powerful tool in increasing their audience's appreciation and enjoyment of the concert, but also a useful way to clarify their thoughts about the music that they are to perform. In a similar way, music critics have often found writing them a valuable activity and it is no coincidence that some of the greatest writers on music have also written quantities of programme notes. The writing of what used to be called the 'annotated programme' has a history extending back to the eighteenth century, and old books of collected programme notes can be found in bookshops and libraries. Programme notes can also be found in music magazines, on CD inserts and record sleeves, as well as on the internet.

The guide is in four sections:

Overview

This section briefly reiterates the main points made in the Diploma Syllabus about the basic form your programme notes should take and the marking criteria against which they will be assessed.

Research

This covers what you should do before you actually start writing. It is important that you give sufficient time to research and preparation. This will not only help you to write better notes but will also increase your background knowledge so that you are better prepared for the Viva Voce.

Detailed advice

Here there is more detailed guidance about the structure and content of your programme notes, as well as some helpful advice about conventions of writing style and format.

Practical help

This includes some top tips and examples of good programme notes plus an opportunity for you to test yourself by spotting the good notes among the not so good!

Overview

At DipABRSM level you are required to write programme notes of 1,100 words (±10%), while for LRSM the length is 1,800 words (±10%).

Your programme notes should illuminate the programme/recital content in an interesting and relevant way. At DipABRSM level, imagine that you are writing for a generalist audience; at LRSM level you can angle them towards a more musically literate audience.

Look at programme notes written for professional concerts and CDs to help you get an idea of what is required.

You need to bring two copies of your programme notes along to the exam, which the examiners will retain. The examiners will refer to them as the exam takes place and may ask you questions about them.

The Viva Voce is designed to enable you to show that the programme notes are definitely your own work by enlarging on and, where necessary, clarifying what you have written. It is also an opportunity for you to discuss your approach to putting together and matching the demands of the programme.

For a full list of regulations please refer to the Diploma Syllabus.

Marking criteria

When writing your programme notes, bear in mind the criteria against which your work will be assessed.

		DipABRSM	LRSM
Distinction	Excellent. Candidate has demonstrated exemplary standards in most areas examined.	Notes are pertinent and persuasively written, with thoroughly researched and well-balanced commentary.	Notes are highly perceptive and persuasively written, with a high level of research and excellent organization of material.
A high pass	Very good. Candidate has demonstrated commendable standards in most areas examined and may have shown excellence in some.	Notes provide an interesting and relevant commentary on the items performed. The material is well-organized and logically researched.	Notes are pertinent and persuasively written. The material is well-organized and logically researched.
A clear pass	Good. Candidate has demonstrated a good overall standard in most areas examined.	Notes provide well-chosen detail on items performed, and firm evidence of helpful analysis based on sound research. Good presentation, structure, level of literacy and grammatical accuracy.	Notes provide well-chosen, detail on items performed, and firm evidence of helpful analysis based on sound research. Good presentation, structure, level of literacy and grammatical accuracy.
Pass	Candidate has shown competence in most areas examined and has satisfied the requirements for the award.	Notes give background on items performed with some evidence of appropriate analysis and research. Acceptable level of presentation, literacy and accuracy, avoiding unexplained technical language.	Notes give background on items performed with some evidence of appropriate analysis and research. Acceptable level of presentation, literacy and accuracy, avoiding unexplained technical language.
Fail	Candidate has not satisfied the basic requirements for the award.	Notes fail to give background on items performed or sufficient evidence of appropriate analysis and research. Inadequate presentation and grammatically weak.	Notes fail to give background on items performed or sufficient evidence of appropriate analysis and research. Inadequate presentation and grammatically weak.

Research

Significantly, one word that appears in each of the criteria statements is 'research'. Background research can provide fascinating insights into the composer's intentions, and an understanding of the wider context of the music to be performed can sometimes quite radically affect its interpretation. The time you invest in research for programme note writing and the Viva Voce may well end up having a beneficial effect on the Section 1 requirements of your diploma exam and is certainly time well spent. But just how should this process of research be approached?

Structure, content and context of the music

The first step is to consider how the piece works on its own terms by considering all aspects of its structure and content. This is something that generally happens automatically during the learning of the piece, but putting it into its wider context and relating it to the musical developments of its period demands a separate study. You may need to consider issues of performance practice. For example, was the piece originally written for a different instrument from the one on which you are performing? A description of the type of instrument for which the work was originally written, together with any conventions related to the style of performance on that instrument, may enhance the listener's appreciation of the music. Reading a book such as *The Historical Performance of Music* by Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell (Cambridge University Press, 1999) may deepen your understanding of research into musical performance.

Listen to other works by the composer and his contemporaries

Listening to other works by the composer and to works of a similar kind is also a valuable activity. For example, it would be useful for a pianist at DipABRSM level preparing Chopin's Nocturne in E to play through and listen to other nocturnes by Chopin. This will establish what the Nocturne in E has in common with the others, and those features that make it unique, as well as help with stylistic understanding and identification. The nocturnes of John Field (which gave Chopin the stimulus and inspiration to write his own) might also be investigated; you may wish to consider the differences between Chopin's piano and the modern instrument; perhaps the view that Bellini was an important influence on Chopin's melodic style might lead to an investigation of one of Bellini's operas, and so on. These kinds of practical activities will help you to place the piece in a broad historical and musical context. But before that, you will need to learn that Field and Bellini are two composers worth researching in relation to Chopin's nocturne. Your teacher may point you in the right direction, but you may also discover this kind of information through your own research of written sources.

Background reading

Written sources fall loosely into two categories – primary and secondary. Broadly speaking, primary sources are documents such as manuscripts and letters that have a direct bearing on the work, while secondary sources include other materials such as biographies, dictionaries and histories. General history books, such as Grout's *A History of Western Music* (Norton, 2001 with C.V. Palisca), are useful in providing a broad overview of a musical period or composer. More detailed information can be found in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, second edition* (Macmillan, 2001) referred to as *New Grove II*, which is an invaluable and essential tool for the researcher. The bibliographies contained in *Grove* will lead to further information, such as biographies and books on specific works. If your library does not have a particular book that you are looking for, it is usually possible for the library to order it from elsewhere. As part of its diploma support material, the Associated Board publishes a list of reading suggestions which is continually updated and available on the Board's website (www.abrsm.org/exams/diplomas). Candidates without internet access can request a copy from the Associated Board's diploma office in London.

Thematic catalogues, such as Köchel's catalogue of the works of Mozart or Schmieder's *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis*, should not be regarded as just the domain of serious, academic researchers. While only specialist music libraries tend to have copies, if you can gain access

to them it is usually very helpful because entries for individual works often include a bibliography on that specific work – a terrific short-cut to the core material! Many scholarly and good quality editions of music contain introductions, written by the editor or a specialist, and these can also provide detailed information relevant to a programme note.

Contact the publisher

For works that are either fairly contemporary and about which little may have been written, or perhaps are less well known or infrequently performed, it may be a good idea to contact the publisher. Often publishers keep files of material relating to works in their catalogue which they are happy to share with interested parties.

Use reliable, up-to-date sources

It is vitally important to be critical of all sources of information. Try to use up-to-date books that are reliable and contain the results of serious scholarship. Much musical information on the internet is poorly presented and contains errors. Always double-check factual information using a reliable source. Similarly, some CD inserts are written by experts and are based on thorough historical study, while others are badly organised and misleading. While gathering information, take notes and keep a record of all the sources you use so that you can refer back to them at a later date if necessary. Keeping your work well organized will ensure that vital information is not forgotten or mislaid.

Gathering together the appropriate materials is only the start. Research is not simply a matter of stringing together a group of relevant quotations, or paraphrasing a couple of writers. The information needs to be ordered, interpreted and personalised in the light of your own experience of the music. Facts will lead to ideas and conclusions should be drawn from the information gathered.

Detailed advice

Structure and content

Allow content to determine structure

Many programme notes are written in three sections:

- a brief introduction to the composer
- a section about the work's historical context and the circumstances surrounding its composition
- a description of the work itself

This may sometimes be the best way to present the information, but the structure of any programme note will be determined by its content. A different degree of emphasis will be given to the various kinds of information, such as historical, social, biographical, as well as musical and analytical, within each note.

Historical background

All programme notes need to provide a balance between background information and more musical information related to the specific work performed. Many programme notes will briefly recount the circumstances of composition, including details of commission, the first performance of the work and, if useful, brief information on its publication.

Don't use too much technical language

Unlike painting, music does not keep still while you study it and the concert-goer has only one chance of identifying important points in the performance. In attempting to describe in detail the actual progress of the music, the programme note writer risks losing communication with a majority of the audience through inappropriate use of technical language (see page 9). The programme note should therefore be an interesting, stimulating and relevant commentary on the items performed and not an anatomical breakdown of their structure. Sentences along the lines of 'In the recapitulation, the chromatic second theme of the first subject group starts in the relative major and modulates through G minor...' are inappropriate. Discussion of the progress of the music should be limited to generally recognizable features rather than the finer details of its inner workings. Most kinds of analysis tend in any case to make for fairly difficult reading and are more appropriately placed in educational textbooks and musicological essays aimed at a specialist readership.

Avoid poetic description

There is a danger in programme note writing that description is used as a substitute for analysis. While some descriptive terminology may be used to good effect, poetic or picturesque descriptions of musical events along the lines of 'The fiery theme that had led to a series of blazing major chords in the exposition now leads to an air of resignation from which no spark of hope can rekindle the dying embers' are generally inappropriate to an understanding of the music! The poet and music critic W. J. Turner amusingly identified two extremes of approach in his volume of essays *Facing the Music: Reflections of a Music Critic* (Bell, 1933):

> There are two diametrically opposite kinds of programme notes – the purely descriptive and the purely technical-analytical. In my opinion, both are equally objectionable and useless. The descriptive programme note offers great opportunities for bad writers and poor musicians to show what havoc they can make of English prose. The writers who describe symphonies as if they were sunsets or battles, or election conflicts between the good and evil parties in the Universe, are useless to everybody, and positively harmful to those who are seriously trying to understand the art of music. But those who eschew all descriptions of this sort and give merely a dry technical analysis are, in my opinion, just as remote from the useful function of the annotator and critic.

Keep the information relevant and interesting

The main function of a programme note is to help the reader develop an understanding of the music. Relevant biographical and historical information is important in this process, especially when linked to the music's conception. Placing the work against the background of what the composer set out to achieve is a good starting point. Topics such as the impact a particular work made on its earliest audiences and whether the work was written for a particular performer may also be of interest. Certainly those features of the work that make it unusual or particularly innovative should be discussed. Alternatively, if the composer was working within an established tradition, some well-chosen details of how the work reflects that tradition might contextualise the work in an interesting and helpful way. While it is important not to be afraid of telling the human story behind a piece of music, provided it is directly relevant, it is not appropriate to write long passages on the personal life and lifestyle of the composer. All biographical information should be directly linked to the music presented. It is the music itself that must form the main focus of attention. Crucially, writers should consider what the audience wants to read, not simply what they want to write about.

Prose style and format

Whilst poor grammar can be a reason for failure (see marking criteria, page 4) the most important aspect of your programme note is its content. The following advice will help you polish the presentational aspects of your programme notes.

Programme notes should be written in clear and direct prose that informs and enlightens the reader. Clarity is essential. While avoiding subjectivity and the first person pronoun ('in my opinion' or 'I like this because'), you should aim to be neither invisible nor too intrusive. The use of language and the principles of good writing can be found in many books on those subjects. Below are some general guidelines that focus on areas peculiar to writing about music. More detailed information can be found in *Music in Words* by Trevor Herbert (ABRSM Publishing, 2001).

Use of capitals

Capitals should be used for musical periods such as the Renaissance, but not adjectivally (e.g. romantic expression, *galant* style, or classical elegance). Capitals should also be used for adjectives derived from proper names (e.g. Mozartian), specific titles such as First Piano Concerto (but Beethoven's piano concertos) as well as titles of movements such as Adagio or Rondo. Names of sonata-form sections usually do not require a capital.

Use of italics

Italics should be used for titles of books and musical works such as operas and symphonic poems, for dynamics and their abbreviations, and also for any foreign terms or short phrases which have not become adopted into the English language (assuming English is the familiar tongue of the writer). Hence, use italic for musical terms such as *con sordino* and *lamentoso*, but normal type for pizzicato, ostinato and legato. Use normal type with single quotation marks for titles of single songs, motets, madrigals, and similar works, and for nicknames applied to instrumental works (e.g. 'Moonlight' Sonata). If in doubt, refer to *New Grove II*.

In general, keep punctuation to a minimum. Short sentences are often best.

The use of technical language

DipABRSM

At DipABRSM level, you should write your programme notes for a general concert audience – that is, an audience of non-musicians who are interested in music and are fairly knowledgeable. If your programme contains standard repertoire works, the generalist audience will probably already know something about them and may have heard either live or recorded performances of them before. Writing about very well-known pieces may initially seem a daunting task (what more can there be left to say about Bach's Cello Suites or Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata?). But the audience will still appreciate being reminded, or told for the first time, of the background to the pieces, the composers' intentions, and other relevant information about the works and what makes them popular. Some technical but universally common language may be helpful and necessary, but its meaning should always be clear. The following examples show the style of writing you are aiming for at DipABRSM level:

- The defining features of the chaconne are a triple metre and an ostinato (repeating) bass line, which often begins with a descending scale. The repeated bass line of this chaconne is simply a series of four descending notes, which can be heard very clearly in the introduction.
- Like the majority of Scarlatti's arias, 'Ergiti, amor' uses the 'da capo' aria form that dominated eighteenth-century Italian opera. It consists of three sections (ABA), in which the repeated A section is usually sung with additional ornamentation.
- Towards the end of the movement there is the conventional cadenza passage which provides an opportunity for the performer to improvise using themes from the movement. The cadenza played today is not an improvisation, but has been written by the performer in a Mozartian style.
- The composer now introduces a short bridge-passage, using the brass and woodwind in question-and-answer style. He ingeniously uses this section as a link from the agitated and dramatic first theme to the more flowing and lyrical second idea. The melody here is played by the lower woodwind, saxophones and French horns, creating a warm atmosphere, accompanied by rich harmonies in the trombones and basses.
- The third movement is based on a Hebridean song and evokes the Scottish landscape. Whereas, in the version for full orchestra, the flute plays the melody, in this chamber arrangement it is given to the oboe. The harp plays an important accompanying role in this movement, helping to create a highly dreamlike atmosphere.

LRSM

At LRSM level, you need to discuss the musical content in more detail and with more technical language. Write as though your programme notes are going to be read by an intelligent, informed reader. Here are some examples:

- The third variation combines the characteristic dotted rhythm of the main theme with a revision of the original melodic contour, now based on the dissonant interval of an augmented fourth – the 'diabolus in musica' (devil in music) of medieval music theory. While the basic binary (AB) structure of the theme is maintained, the second section is much extended with contrapuntal elaborations of the melodic material.
- In the Adagio, effective use is made of many of the violin's tone-colours, for example through the use of the mute and harmonics at the end of the piece which produce a pure and ringing sound. This contributes to one of the essential features of the composer's style – his unique adaptation of French impressionism. The oriental-influenced harmonic and melodic language is in complete contrast to the previous movement, with its emphasis on tonal melody and conventional triadic harmony.

- The serene rondo theme of the finale is anchored to a deep pedal note and has the character of a folksong. The spacious layout of the movement allows for two episodes – easily discernible since the tension increases as each plunges into strident and energetic octave passages in minor keys – as well as a good deal of development besides. The rondo theme becomes the focus of the brilliant *prestissimo* coda in which long trills decorate the penultimate appearance, anticipating Beethoven's most mature style of piano writing.
- The interweaving contrapuntal lines contrast with chordal textures, particularly at the words 'and the glory of the Lord'. Here, Handel often makes use of the hemiola, whereby a duple or two-time feel is superimposed on the 3/4 metre at the cadential points.
- Hans Keller has suggested that C major is Britten's 'own key', the significance of which for the composer lies in the fact that it 'probably represents a state of naturalness'. At one level, the opening 54 bars do seem excessively economical and repetitive, but might it not be the case that Britten here is suggesting that the worship of God is indeed humankind's natural state?

Presentation

You must present two copies of your programme notes to the examiners at the start of the exam. They should be either typed or printed in black, and the title page must contain the following information:

- the full title of the diploma and, for performance diplomas, your instrument
- the date of the exam
- the word count (excluding title page)
- the works in your programme in the order in which you are to perform them

In addition, all pages must be consecutively numbered. Please remember that for the exam you must not identify your name anywhere on or inside your programme notes.

You are not expected to cite sources of information in detail, but should refer the reader to the author's name. It is not appropriate to include a bibliography, although you should be prepared to discuss your sources in the Viva Voce.

Part of the challenge of writing good programme notes is to pare the text down to essentials and make sure that every word is important. It can be more difficult to write about a piece in a couple of paragraphs than it is to discuss it at length. Stick to the word limit which at DipABRSM level is 1,100 words (±10%) and at LRSM level 1,800 words (±10%).

Don't forget to include your declaration form with your programme notes. Details relating to this are to be found on the diploma entry form as well as at the Associated Board's website (www.abrsm.org/exams/diplomas).

Headings and performer lists

There are various ways in which a work can be listed in a programme note. The heading should normally give a formal title with key, catalogue identifier (e.g. Op.3 or K.414) where appropriate, the composer's name (including first name if it is a living composer or if there is more than one composer with that surname e.g. J.S. Bach), and the composer's dates. Each movement or song should be listed. Below is one way in which this can be done, although there are other equally valid ways of doing it. The main thing is that there is consistency.

Sonata in C minor ('Pathétique'), Op.13 Beethoven (1770–1827)
Grave; Allegro di molto e con brio
Adagio cantabile
Rondo: Allegro

For a movement with a title and separate tempo indication, use a colon after the title (e.g. *Rondo: Allegro*). If a movement has a major change of tempo in a clearly differentiated section, then a semicolon should be used (e.g. *Grave*; *Allegro di molto e con brio*).

For vocal performances, individual songs are normally grouped together on the page whenever possible, to avoid unnecessary duplication of information and to alert the audience to appropriate places for applause.

It is common to find within the programme a list of performers and their instruments or voices, together with brief biographies. Inclusion of this information is not a diploma requirement but will perhaps be appropriate for recitals which contain chamber music. How and where a list of performers is incorporated will depend upon the chamber repertoire performed and its extent and position within the recital. Short biographies are usually printed at the end of the programme, but there is considerable flexibility about how this information is presented. Biographical information on the performers should not be counted within the word allowance for each diploma.

The use of quotation and plagiarism

Keep quotations brief and credit the author

Literary quotations from composers or commentators can sometimes throw light on important aspects of a piece. However, such quotations must be brief and fully identified as a quotation. Short quotations should be presented in the text within single quotation marks; longer quotations of more than two lines of prose should be indented without quotation marks. A full citation for the source of the quote is unnecessary, but candidates should refer the reader to the author's name. It is not usually appropriate to include music quotations in programme notes.

Always write in your own words

It can be tempting to paraphrase or copy material from published collections of programme notes or from other sources such as CD inserts without acknowledgement of the author. While diploma candidates are encouraged to look at programme notes written for professional concerts, as well as CDs, plagiarism must be avoided. (There is a note in the Diploma Syllabus about plagiarism and the necessity for all written submissions to be accompanied by a declaration form.) Some published programme notes will be written in a particular style that would be difficult to pass off successfully as your own work, and will be familiar to the examiners, while others will be poorly written or inaccurate. Doing your own research and analysis will reap rewards as your enthusiasm and personal insight will communicate itself to the reader. It will usually be clear to the examiners during the course of the Viva Voce whether the work is your own or not.

Notes for singers

Programme notes should normally contain the texts of vocal music. When a translation is necessary, the text and its translation should be presented in facing columns to allow the reader to cross-refer and due credit should be given to the translator. The texts will not be counted towards the required number of words of the programme notes.

Recitals of vocal music will normally contain more items than those in instrumental programmes. Singers are therefore not expected to provide as much detail in their programme notes as instrumentalists. However, they must still fulfil the marking criteria.

Practical help

Top tips

Read aloud

Try reading your programme notes aloud. Sometimes a sentence that appears good on paper sounds convoluted, confusing or just plain boring when spoken.

Practise your Viva Voce

Have some practice sessions where the 'examiner' (perhaps your teacher) questions you and searches a little more deeply. The examiners will base many of their questions in the Viva Voce on the issues raised in your programme notes, so practise explaining your points and providing examples to support your responses. Getting lots of practice before the day will give you extra confidence in the exam.

Be self-critical

Ask yourself: Do the notes bring the music alive? Do they give the reader relevant information about the composer and the circumstances of composition? Do they provide an enriching insight into the music? Do they encourage the audience to listen? Will they stimulate, entertain and interest the audience? Will they increase enjoyment of the performance?

Test yourself

If you can spot the four examples of quality work in amongst the less useful material below, then you are well on the way to writing good programme notes! Turn to page 15 for the answers.

1. It is well worth noting that in contrast to the two movements sandwiching it, the laid-back character of this movement, with its long hairpins and relaxed feel, is a bit like one of those nocturnes by the likes of Chopin.
2. Exactly when, why and for whom Bach originally wrote his cello suites remains unknown. The earliest known source for them is a copy made about 1730 by Bach's second wife Anna Magdalena, but they almost certainly date from his years (1717–23) at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen.
3. In the first movement the four percussion instruments are used to create what the composer has described as a 'spray' of sound, with a soft attack and slow decay. In the solo clarinet part, groups of three or four pitches are used to highlight the specific qualities of timbre and register in the accompanying instruments, creating a fascinating dialogue between them.
4. The trombone is always difficult to play with a rounded sound, owing to the predominantly straight tubing, and with such long melodic lines requiring a huge lung capacity, excellent breath control and a strong embouchure, this piece is very challenging and demands a totally secure and virtuosic technique.
5. The model for Part 1 of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Das Wolhtemperirte Clavier* was J.C.F. Fischer's (1670 –1746) *Ariadne musica*, which contained twenty preludes and fugues in nineteen different keys, and which was reissued in 1715. Early versions of twelve of the preludes are found in the *Clavierbüchlein* for Wilhelm Friedmann Bach (Bach's eldest and favourite son) of 1720. Part 2 dates from the 1740s: the manuscript made by Bach's son-in-law, J.C. Altnickol, is dated 1744 but bears later amendments in Bach's own hand (www.greatcomposers/german/keyboard).

6 It opens with a *meno vivo* melody which is developed and repeated before leading into a section which increases in speed as a sequence of flowing quavers descends through the range of the instrument to its bottom B flat. This is followed by a rubato section that gradually increases in intensity leading to the climax of the piece where a passage of quavers rises up dramatically to a high and sustained semibreve. A section for solo piano is heard before moving into the second main section of the piece where a new melismatic melody is developed, before the original melody is repeated leading us to the end of the movement.

7 The Three Sonatas for Violin and Piano, opus 30, were composed in 1802 and published the following year. While the title page of the set implies a subordinate role for the violin in its wording ('Three sonatas for the pianoforte with the accompaniment of a violin'), Beethoven treats the two instruments as equal partners throughout.

8 In his article on the composer contained in *Grove's Dictionary* (1954), Eric Blom wrote that Rachmaninov's music 'is well constructed and effective, but monotonous in texture, which consists in essence mainly of artificial and gushing tunes accompanied by a variety of figures derived from arpeggios'.

9 I think that although this song explores the nature of the human condition in general terms, in my opinion it also expresses Schubert's own individual sense of loneliness and I try to portray this in my interpretation.

10 Although Ravel first began work on his Piano Trio in 1908, it was not completed until the summer of 1914. Despite the greater part of it having been composed under the emotional pressures generated by the crisis that led to the outbreak of the First World War, there is no trace of grim events in the music.

Two examples of good programme notes

Sonata in E flat minor: 1.10.1905 Janáček (1854–1928)
Presentiment: Con moto
Death: Adagio

Written 'In memory of a worker bayonetted during the demonstrations calling for the university in Brno' this sonata is prefaced by a brief prose poem by the composer:

> The white marble staircase of the House of Artists in Brno...
> A simple worker František Pavlík falls, stained with blood...
> He came only to plead for a university... and was killed by cruel murderers.

Deeply affected by this tragic event of October 1905, Janáček composed a piano sonata subtitled 'A Street Scene' which consisted at first of three single movements: Presentiment, Death and Death March. The only copy of the third movement was burnt by the composer in a moment of extreme self-criticism during the final rehearsal for the premiere. In desperation he even threw the remaining movements into a river, but the foresighted performer had by that time made a copy and in 1924 Janáček gave permission for its publication.

The first movement, in sonata form, opens with a mournful theme which is starkly interrupted by a strident ostinato (repeating) motif. This motif is always connected to the main theme and in its diminutive version supplies the momentum for the development section. The second subject provides reflective calm in an otherwise tempestuous movement. It is likely that the composer was recalling the crowd scenes and events of the poem while writing this highly-charged music, which contains much anger and frustration.

The dirge-like theme of the Adagio is directly related to the ostinato motif of the first movement and is characterised by avoidance of accents on the main metric beat. This imbues the music with the quality of Czech speech-rhythms, a subject Janáček studied with great interest.

The piano writing has an idiosyncratic originality and an almost unidiomatic pianistic quality. Nevertheless, it is always richly expressive and passionately creative in its fervent poetry. This sonata is indeed, as Hans Hollander has put it, 'a heroic epitaph in sound'.

La vie anterieure Duparc (1848–1933)

[Accompanied by the text and a translation.]

La vie anterieure was originally written in 1884 for voice and orchestra. It is a through-composed setting of a poem by Baudelaire, from *Les fleurs du mal* (1857), in which the poet recollects, with aching nostalgia and sadness, a wonderful former life in a distant country. This is beautifully reflected in Duparc's setting which moves from passionate excitement in the middle section to intense sadness and introspection in the piano postlude. The composer responds with highly chromatic harmony (influenced by Wagner and Franck, his teacher) and long, flexible melodic lines that sensitively suggest the natural inflection and mood of the words.

Many of the hallmarks of Duparc's style are here, including the use of long-held pedal notes in the accompaniment (he uses a drone in the bass throughout the first stanza), rhythmic flexibility, subtle modulations, a recognition of the different tonal qualities within each vocal range and above all an intense lyricism. The piano part is not simply an accompaniment but eloquently interacts with the voice, with internal counterpoints and melodies of its own.

Conclusion

The quality of your programme notes should reflect the quality aimed for in every other aspect of the diploma exam. Try to write programme notes that are interesting and relevant, and which demonstrate your knowledge and personal research. Informative and well-written programme notes will significantly enhance the listening experience of your audience, so the investment of time spent on their preparation will certainly pay dividends!

Test yourself answers

1 Uses inappropriate slang (sandwiching, laid-back, hairpins, the likes of).

2 A good, informative comment.

3 A good, analytical comment which usefully incorporates the composer's own description of the music.

4 Rather than discussing the music, the writer seems to be arrogantly suggesting that we will be impressed by a great trombone technique.

5 Superficially 'academic' and rather pretentious. Uses too much irrelevant factual information, especially dates. Also, a website is not the place to establish facts.

6 Boringly descriptive – this leads to that, before leading to this, and so on. Assumes the reader knows what the terms *meno vivo*, bottom B flat, rubato, quaver, semibreve and melismatic mean.

7 Good, factual and relevant comment.

8 Blom's subjective comment, which damns Rachmaninov with faint praise, is of no relevance to today's audience. The source is very dated and has now been superseded.

9 Uses the first person pronoun, which could be avoided.

10 Good background material which usefully contextualises the piece.

Writing Programme Notes is intended as a guide for Music Performance and Music Direction diploma candidates and their teachers, although it is relevant to all those involved in writing concert programmes. It contains practical advice and information on all aspects of the process, from background research to conventions of writing style and presentation.

Nigel Scaife, DPhil (Oxon), MMus RCM, GRSM, studied the piano at the Royal College of Music and the University of California before completing a doctorate in musicology at Oxford University. He has wide experience as a performer, teacher and writer on music. As Syllabus Principal at the Associated Board he has been closely involved in the development of the Diploma Syllabus.

Royal Academy of Music
Royal College of Music
Royal Northern College of Music
Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama

ASSOCIATED BOARD
OF THE ROYAL SCHOOLS OF MUSIC

24 Portland Place
London W1B 1LU
United Kingdom

www.abrsm.org

Registered Charity No. 292182

WPN 04/2005