

Simpson College  
Department of Music

# Guidelines for Writing Recital Program Notes

Adopted January 15, 2013

This document sets forth guidelines for the writing of program notes for recitals. All students performing Senior degree recitals must provide a set of researched program notes as part of the requirements for the Capstone in the Major. Students performing Junior and elective recitals are not required to provide program notes. If, however, a student does wish to prepare program notes for a junior or elective recital, then these notes should conform to the guidelines set forth below.

## Capstone in the Major

The Senior Recital serves as the required Capstone project for music majors. The Senior Recital fulfills characteristics of a Capstone project as set forth in the *Engaged Citizenship Curriculum*:

A capstone experience in the major will:

- engage students in advanced disciplinary or interdisciplinary work to synthesize and culminate the students' learning
- require students to produce a final paper, report, creative work, portfolio, exhibition, performance, or other document or presentation appropriate for the discipline
- require students to share their work with an audience as determined by the department.

The recital program notes constitute the scholarly component of the Capstone in Music. They enable students to demonstrate their ability to conduct meaningful research into the music that they perform and to write effectively about their findings. These notes will be distributed to the recital audience along with the formal program copy.

## Audience

Program notes should be written with an average recital attendee in mind – someone who may not possess a formal musical education, but who has a general familiarity with the broad outlines of the Western musical tradition as well as the conventions of concert performance. For such an audience, it is not necessary to define basic terms, such as *adagio*, *arpeggio*, *Baroque*, or *sonata*. Nonetheless, more technical terms – *appoggiatura*, *dominant*, *recapitulation* – should be avoided where possible and defined when necessary.

Because the program notes represent the scholarly component of the Capstone project, they are not to be used as a vehicle for the expression of personal messages or sentiments. Consequently, the following topics are not appropriate for inclusion in the program notes:

- Expressions of gratitude to teachers, friends, and relatives for past support;
- “Shout outs” to friends and family who have travelled to attend the recital;
- Reminiscences about good times in the Music Department;
- Communication about future goals or plans.

If you desire to express thanks to teachers, friends, or relatives, the best way to do this is with hand-written thank-you notes.

### **Length**

Strive to be concise. The program entry for each piece should consist of only one or two paragraphs. Using an 11- or 12-point font, the entire set of program notes should fit onto the front and back of a single sheet of letter-size paper. Program notes for vocal recitals, however, may require more than two pages if the program notes are interspersed with song translations.

### **Content**

The purpose of program notes is to provide the members of the audience with information that will inform their hearing and understanding of the music to be performed. Program notes should focus on subject matter that is relevant to the performance and avoid topics that are tangential.

Given the brevity of program notes, it is not possible to address every noteworthy aspect of a piece. Rather, focus on two or three issues that will be most interesting or useful to the audience. Treat each program entry as a mini-essay with a thesis and supporting evidence. Readers will find a focused consideration of a couple of issues to be much more interesting than a mere jumble of facts about the piece.

Appropriate topics to address for each piece might include:

- How the piece came to be written;
- The history of the work’s reception;
- The relationship between the work and biographical details of the composer’s life;
- (For vocal music) Relevant information about the poet or the poetry;
- The musical form of the work;
- (For programmatic works) A discussion of the song’s programmatic elements;
- Compositional techniques employed in the work;
- The relationship between music and the text;
- The compositional genre that the piece represents;
- The significance of the composition in the performing repertoire;
- The place of the composition within the composer’s oeuvre.

Inappropriate topics would include:

- General information about the composer's biography which is not directly relevant to the piece;
- Your personal feelings about the piece;
- The technical challenges you experienced in preparing the piece.

Make sure that each program note entry prominently includes the title and composer of the piece and that the title is the same as is listed in the program.

### **Research**

Program notes should be researched using reliable, authoritative sources – the same sources that you would consult for a formal research paper. Do not rely upon a single source for the writing about any specific piece. For some obscure compositions, it is sometimes difficult to find multiple sources. In this case, expand the parameters of your research to include sources that address the composer or the genre.

### **Citations**

While writing good program notes requires a significant amount of scholarship, the program notes themselves are typically not presented to the audience as formal scholarly writing. Consequently, the published program notes should not include the research citations.

On the other hand, it is important that you are able to demonstrate the authority of your research. Consequently, you will be required to prepare a second copy of your program notes with full scholarly citations included. This copy will not be distributed to the audience. These citations may take the form of either footnotes or endnotes. In addition, you should prepare a complete bibliographical listing of your sources. It is not necessary to format these annotated notes to fit onto two pages since they will not be reproduced for distribution. Both the annotated and the non-annotated notes are due at the same time.

### **Quotations**

A particularly apt quotation from the composer or a noted scholar or performer can enhance the interest and authority of your program notes. Nonetheless, quotations should be used sparingly since they limit the space that is available for your own words and thoughts. Strive to limit individual quotations to no more than a sentence. Avoid quoting whole paragraphs. Finally, be sure that the author or speaker of each quote is clearly attributed in the text of the program notes.

### **Photographs / Art work**

While the use of images is not requirement, selective inclusion of photographs or artwork in your program notes can be an effective and engaging way to inform the reader. If you choose to include images in your program notes, observe the following guidelines:

- **Size:** The size of each image should be small enough that it does not significantly limit the amount of space available for text.
- **Legibility:** Make sure that important detail is discernable when the image is reproduced at a reduced size. Often, it is helpful to crop the image so that the most important detail may be highlighted and reproduced at a relatively larger size.
- **Reproducibility:** Because the program notes will be photocopied in black and white, make a test copy of each your images to insure that they reproduce well at low resolution and in black and white.

### Translations

For vocal recitals, it is customary to provide translations of non-English texts. For each non-English piece on the recital, your teacher will determine whether you should create your own translation or use a published translation. Regardless of who has made the translation, the translator of each text should be clearly identified.

The translation should accurately reflect the meaning of the original language. Bear in mind that some performance translations (i.e., translations intended to be sung) take great liberties with the meaning of the original text because of the priority that they place upon maintaining the same poetic meter and rhyme scheme as the original text. For this reason, it is generally best to avoid using performance translations.

The program notes may be interspersed with the text translations or else the two may be provided on separate sheets. If the former, then the total amount of space allocated to the program notes should be equivalent to two pages of text.

### Submission of program copy

Program copy must be submitted to your applied teacher for proof-reading and for feedback. The due dates for program copy are as follows:

- **Complete Draft Deadline:** *Due one week before the Final Copy Deadline.*  
A complete draft of your program notes (including complete citations) is required in order to provide your applied teacher an opportunity to offer editorial feedback.
- **Final Copy Deadline:** *See the schedule published by the Music Academic Assistant.*  
The date of the final copy deadline depends upon the date of the recital. Each semester, the Music Academic Assistant will publish a schedule of copy due dates for each recital. Both the program copy and the program note final copy are due on this date.

### Copies

The Music Department will be responsible for determining the number of copies needed and for having the copies made. The Music Department will cover the cost of programs and program notes for Senior Degree Recitals. For all other recitals, students will be billed for the copying costs.

**[Addendum for applied teachers only]**

**Grading**

Formal program notes are a required element of all Senior Recitals. It is left to each teacher, however, to determine how the program note requirement is factor into the students' grades.