

Maximizing your Concert Experience; or How to Write a Concert Paper.

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Although each instructor of an introductory music class will have his or her own requirements (and these should always be followed) I thought I would offer a few pointers for going to a classical concert, getting the most out of it, and improving your paper in the process. At the end of this document you will find an outline that may be of help to you in summarizing the thoughts presented here.

A note about bringing children: Bringing along a friend or family member is a great idea for this assignment, but most classical concerts demand relative silence and attentiveness from audience members. Hence, it is probably not the best idea to bring children under 6; and even those from 7-10 should be able to sit quietly for an hour or more. Many ensembles offer special kids concerts, and most teachers try to include at least one of these on their lists of acceptable concerts; so look for these if you would really like to bring a toddler or young child. If in doubt, ask your teacher.

I. Before you go, Familiarize Yourself

Once you have chosen a concert, do some research first. Go to the website of the ensemble that is performing the concert. See if you can **get a list of the works being performed** in advance (these are almost always available). If it is an orchestral or chamber concert, often the concert's title is simply a list of the works being played (*Colorado Symphony Orchestra performs Mahler's 3rd symphony and the Elgar Cello Concerto*, for instance, tells you exactly what works are being played, and serves as a "working title" for the concert). If it is a choral concert, there may be a catchy "title" (*St. Martin's Chamber Choir performs "Lullabies and Nocturnes,"* for instance, tells you only the "theme" of the concert [i.e., works having to do with nighttime and sleep, in this case], but the specific pieces being performed are not in the title).

Once you have found out the program, **do a little research into the composers**. Look them up on the web, or go to a library and look them up in a music dictionary or encyclopaedia (the "Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians" is a good one, and every library should have a copy). Find out the answers to these questions (and any others you may have):

1. When did he/she live?
2. This puts him/her into which era/style (Baroque, Romantic, etc.)
3. What country did he/she come from?
4. Read a brief outline of his/her life. Find anything interesting or unusual?
5. See if you can find any mention of the specific work(s) you are hearing.
6. Translate any foreign terms in the title of the work, or in sections or movements of it.

Your teacher is a good resource for any of the above, as well!

Also make sure you **know where the performance venue is**, how to get there, where to park, and how much parking is likely to cost. If you go to a downtown event (Colorado Symphony Orchestra, for instance), parking will likely cost almost as much as, or even more than, the tickets! Consider using public transportation. Also remember not to leave valuables in your car, put them in the trunk, or leave them at home. Public parking lots for concerts (of any style) are beloved of thieves.

Plan ahead to get there on time. Remember, the area of the city may be unfamiliar, the parking complicated, there may be lines at the box office, it will take you time to find your seat, etc. Most classical concerts don't allow seating until the first piece on the program is over. This, in some cases, may be the intermission! And if you miss half the concert, you'll get a failing grade on your paper.

Dress well, although you needn't go overboard. "Business casual" is usually sufficient. You don't want to feel out-of-place either by wearing a ratty t-shirt and cut-offs (under-dressed), or a tuxedo or ball-gown (over-dressed). Colorado audiences are usually more casual than on the East or West Coast, but they still put a little effort into their appearance.

Make sure to **bring a pen or pencil**, and probably something to write on (a small 3"x 5" notebook works well, because you can fit it into a purse or pocket, and not look funny carrying it around).

II. Before the Concert Begins

After obtaining your ticket, find your seat (ticket takers and ushers will help give directions). Make sure to **get a program**. If they are out of programs, BEG! Or, if worse comes to worst, pick up a discarded copy of the program after the concert. This is a good reason to do a little research before the concert, so you know what's going on in case they are out of programs.

Read the program notes. These usually follow the listing of the works being performed that night. This will not only help you understand what's going on, and what's special about each piece, but also help you write a much better and more informed paper. It will also enhance your experience immensely.

Make general notes about the concert hall, the people around you, the atmosphere, your seats, anything that might add spice to your paper later. Jot down any questions you have. Many will be answered by the end of the concert, but some you may wish to put into the paper.

III. During the Concert

I generally look for three things in concert papers:

1. General observations about your experience
2. Detailed description about the music and what the performers did
3. Your personal reactions to 1. and 2.

Hence, during the concert you will want to **be as observant as possible**, jotting down notes that may, at the time, seem irrelevant.

Write down any questions you have (such as “Why did the audience applaud [or *not* applaud] then?” or “Who is that person on stage, and what is he/she doing?”).

Take notes about every piece so that you have something to say about *every* (or almost every) piece. Not only does it prove that you stayed for the whole concert (or stayed *awake* for the whole concert!), but it adds weight to the personal reactions you will give at the end (and adds length to your paper!).

Make sure you **have something to say about the music**, so this may require jotting down observations or notes about pieces or movements as they occur (“fast-paced,” “slow,” “sounded like a funeral march,” “made me feel like dancing,” “very abrupt changes of dynamics,” “lyrical,” “there was a long clarinet solo,” “the conductor looked _____ [fill in the blank],” etc.); anything that occurs to you about what you are listening to. If you have done some research, and read the program notes, you can say “I can hear why he wrote it after his wife died (very sad),” or “I know why he named it what he did, because he effectively portrayed that feeling.”

IV. Writing the Paper

When you begin to write your paper (doing so immediately, or within a few days of the concert, will help), **refer to the notes you took** and begin writing about the experience as it happened. You may wish to start with listing 1) the ensemble you heard perform, 2) date and place of concert, 3) title of concert, and/or name of works you heard, 4) names of any featured performers (conductor, soloists, etc.)

Move from the general to the specific when talking about the music.

Try to **be as objective** (i.e. unbiased, like a reporter) **as possible**. You’ll have time for your reactions and opinions later. In fact, they’ll be strengthened if you have been objective in this part of the paper.

Make sure you **say something about every (or almost every) piece**.

Only after you have written a good deal about the music, **add your personal reactions**. These can be positive or negative. And if your opinions are backed up with some solid reasons or reasoning, your teacher will be thrilled (even if it’s negative). For instance, if you disliked the experience, be specific about what it was about the experience that you disliked; say *why* you disliked it. Don’t just simply state an opinion without some reason behind it.

Include a conclusion paragraph that summarizes your experience, and perhaps restates your personal reactions to the concert.

At this point, many students think they are done, and hit “print.” NOT SO! Now you must **EDIT. Go back and re-read your paper**, making corrections to grammar errors, re-writing parts that strike you as awkward the second time through. **Have someone else read your paper**, because they will see things you don’t, and will ask good questions, demonstrating where you have been unclear. Another good idea is to read the paper *out loud*, either to yourself or to someone else. Bad grammar or awkward sentence construction often become apparent when exposed to the ear. Make sure you **spell-check** your paper. You should commit about as much time editing as you spent writing the paper in the first place.

V. Turning in your Paper

Some teachers require you to staple your ticket stubs to the paper. I don’t. But I *do* require students to **attach either a copy of the printed program, or the page out of the program that contains the list of that evening’s pieces**. If you are in an on-line Music class, scan the page of the program that contains the pieces being performed, and attach that (electronically) to your e-mailed paper.

Obviously, **turn in your paper on time**; and it doesn’t hurt to add a **title page** for a more polished presentation. Some students put their papers in a binder or plastic presentation folder. This is not necessary, but it’s up to you. Make sure **your name** is on the paper.

To summarize the above,

I. Before you go, Familiarize Yourself

- get a list of the works being performed
- do a little research into the composers
- your teacher is a good resource
- know where the performance venue is
- plan ahead to get there on time
- dress well
- bring a pen or pencil

II. Before the Concert begins

- get a program
- read the program notes
- make general observations

III. During the Concert

- be as observant as possible
- write down any questions you have
- take notes about every piece
- have something to say about the music

IV. Writing the Paper

- refer to the notes you took
- move from the general to the specific
- be as objective as possible

say something about every piece.
add your personal reactions
include a conclusion paragraph
EDIT: Go back and re-read your paper
Have someone else read your paper
Read your paper out loud
Spell check.

V. Turning in your Paper

attach what your teacher requires (ticket stubs? copy of the program?)
presentation:
title page
your name
turn in on time