Merry Adventures with Beethoven and Other Composers:

A primer about writing program notes with plenty examples

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Introduction

For anyone who would like to consider writing program notes for concerts of classical music, I would like to share some thoughts from my thirty years of experience. Much of what you will read comes from writing program notes for the community-based Danbury (Connecticut) Symphony Orchestra and for concerts by professional groups presented by the Danbury Concert Association.

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It all started because I raised my hand. It was in 1987 at a meeting of the board of the Danbury Music Centre, sponsor of the Danbury Symphony Orchestra (DSO). James Humphreville, the music director, asked if any of the board members might be interested in writing program notes for the concerts. My hand went up. What made me do it? Well, the possibility of fame and fortune briefly stirred me, but that quickly retreated as implausible when I realized that, for outside of a few years of piano lessons, I had no formal background in music. In fact, I had never had a course in music appreciation, music structure or theory. But I love music and I enjoy writing. Mine was a deep avocational interest in classical music that had grown from attending hundreds of symphony concerts from my college days in California (the San Francisco Symphony) to graduate studies at UCLA (the Los Angeles Philharmonic). What followed were several dozen years of academic work in the New York area, so Carnegie Hall concerts were a regular part of my musical diet. I had certainly read many program notes over those years, supplementing them with books about composers and the many eras of classical music.

So from 1988 to 2001, as a result of my hand raising, I provided the program notes for the concerts of the Danbury Symphony. In 1995, Marcia Klebanow, the president of the Danbury Concert Association (DCA), asked me to also provide notes for the professional groups that came to Danbury for their four concerts a year: mainly chamber groups and pianists. I agreed and, as of this writing, continue to write for the DCA, though I live a thousand miles away from Danbury.

Most of the program notes I had read over the years were written by highly knowledgeable musicians, maybe even musicologists. Often the notes were lengthy, dry, more about the structure of the music and less about the composers and their eras. So as I contemplated my new avocation, I decided that *my* program notes would be aimed at the reader like me: someone who, without deep technical knowledge, still has a great interest in the music and composers of the centuries, and would like to know

more. What I was about to do was tell hundreds of stories, all about musical works, how they came to be written and what the listener might expect to hear as a result.

In writing the program notes, I followed the four writing commandments learned in my academic life as a college teacher, administrator, and librarian

1) **Thou must make writing interesting;**
2) **Thou must make writing flow;**
3) **Thou must add some humor where possible;**
4) **Thou must not use two words when one will do.**

To tell these musical stories, I found a variety of ways to help keep the reader's interest. Here are five ways, hardly earthshaking, that have helped me a great deal. In Part I, I'll give you examples.

A) **How about a prologue to begin?**
B) **The first line(s)**
C) **The use of quotations**
D) **Introducing local "color" and/or personal experience**
E) **Taking advantage of the unusual**

Part I Ideas on making program notes more interesting

The programs of community orchestras and chamber groups often consist of three or more works. It is expected that each work will be given its due in the notes. Of course, the writer first needs to listen and be familiar with all the works programmed. Thankfully, YouTube today provides the vast majority of musical works in some performance. Then the writer needs to read about the background of composers leading up to and at the time of writing their works. (Yes, build a collection of music history books or have a library close by.) You can also read the variety of commentaries on works available online, be they by critics, music historians, or notes on recordings. Using insights from other program notes can stimulate the writer. But no plagiarism!

A) How about a prologue to begin?

At first glance, when you are presented with the works on a program for notes, the choice of the works may not seem to have a "theme." A short prologue that ties together the works in some way is my favorite way to focus the reader. I began this approach in the very first concert for which I wrote notes: a DSO concert that featured Gioachinno Rossini overtures and Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, "Eroica."

> *Beethoven and Rossini once met in 1822. Rossini was at the height of his fame especially due to The Barber of Seville. Beethoven was completing his Ninth Symphony and in five years would be dead. In seven years Rossini would give up opera composition completely for forty years of leisure. Beethoven, upon the visit, suggested Rossini remain solely a composer of comic operas, something he believed ideal to the Italian composer's temperament. Rossini's answer is not recorded, but he would hardly have suggested Beethoven also stick to one type of composition for the deaf composer already had written masterpieces of all musical types. (DSO, Nov. 6, 1988)*

Such a prologue personalizes the composers in their own era and alerts the reader to unexpected connections. A writer's style emerges by thinking a bit "outside the box." For example, in another DSO concert (Nov. 8, 1992) featuring works of Richard Wagner (**Overture to The Flying Dutchman**),

Johannes Brahms (**Variations on a Theme of Haydn**)and Ludwig van Beethoven (**Symphony No. 2**), this little prologue added some "connective tissue" to the choices:

> *Wagner, Brahms, Beethoven. Outside of the Germanic nature of these three composers, little connection might appear to their three compositions on today's program, but a connection does exist. In each of these 19th century works, the composer took a giant stride in his musical development. With The Flying Dutchman, Wagner commenced his revolution of music drama. For Brahms, the Variations were his first mature work for orchestra and preceded his First Symphony by three years. For Beethoven, the Second Symphony took him away from Mozart and Haydn and into his own symphonic world.*

Sometimes the works on a program seem far from connected, but you may spot something that does unite them. Consider the following prologue for a program by the Camerata New York:

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	**Manfred Overture and Suite**
Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)	**Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 1**
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)	**Ma Mere L'Oye (Mother Goose) Suite**
Wolfang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)	**Symphony No. 41, "Jupiter" (K. 551)**

> *Many different things can get a composer excited. Robert Schumann, whose boyhood was filled with reading literary classics, was inspired by Manfred, the remorseful hero of the Lord Byron poem. Ottorino Respighi, after the great success of his tone poem, The Pines of Rome, looked back to melodies composed centuries before for further inspiration. A friend's two children provided Maurice Ravel, who never married, so much joy that he composed piano pieces for them based on fairy tale characters. Then one comes to Mozart, who seemed to need little inspiration: the notes just tumbled out on demand. And for his very last symphony, the result is as close to a musical miracle as one will get. (DCA, Oct. 12, 2008)*

Then you have concerts with a theme, such as Russian music, 20th Century music, or music of one composer. Consider this beginning for an All-Tchaikovsky program by the DSO consisting of **Marche Slave, Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture** and **Symphony No. 5 in E minor**

> *Today's concert might be called "minor" Tchaikovsky, not as a criticism of the music, but because all three compositions begin in minor keys. A Romantic composer like Tchaikovsky would choose minor keys to "program" musical "depression" into the listener, that depression to be lifted or intensified as the composition evolved. In both **Marche Slave** and the **Fifth Symphony**, Tchaikovsky provides positive relief, exultant finales in major keys. In the case of **Romeo and Juliet**, the composition goes "from sad to worse" evidencing in music what Shakespeare's words described in prose. Tchaikovsky was a master of composing music that affected the emotions of the listener. (DSO, April 30, 1989)*

Now I don't take credit for the phrase "from sad to worse," but there is nothing wrong with a play on words that might bring a smile.

Then there are times when one discovers an unexpected connection among composers. I was asked to write program notes for a concert by the Danbury Concert Chorus, also sponsored by the Music Centre. It featured works of Antonin Dvořák , Johannes Brahms and George Gershwin, as well as spirituals . What follows is the longest prologue I ever wrote for a concert.

> *The ties that bind in music are often not apparent. Who would believe that Antonín Dvorák is a musical link between Johannes Brahms and George Gershwin? Brahms championed and befriended the young* Dvořák . *After* Dvořák *spent his three years in America (1892-1895), his student Ruben Goldmark became one of Gershwin's first composition teachers. So that's the*

human link of these three gifted composers. But another important sharing was their concern to recognize and utilize the music of their native lands. Brahms wrote the Hungarian Dances and Dvořák *the Slavonic Dances, while Gershwin composed his greatest work* <u>*Porgy and Bess*</u> *around the musical traditions of the Afro-American. These composers each appreciated the culture of the common people, whether they were the laborers in Hamburg, Germany, the peasants of Czechoslovakia, or the shopkeepers of Brooklyn.* ----------

In 1892, Dvořák *finally accepted the persisting invitations of Jeannette Thurber, a patron of the arts, to come to New York and be the director of her National Conservatory of Music. She knew his international fame would bring attention and support to the Conservatory which had a special mission of providing opportunities for women and minorities to study music. Black students were in significant numbers at the Conservatory and among them was Harry T. Burleigh. This young singer became close friends with* Dvořák *and taught him the world of the spiritual, the music of Burleigh's people.*

Dvořák*'s three year stay in New York had a unique impact on American music for he was deeply committed to the concept of national music and wanted to help America find its national voice in music. To the consternation of many, he suggested that the spiritual should be the basis of special consideration for American composers. "Here, in the music you have neglected, even despised" noted* **,** Dvořák *"is something spontaneous, sincere and different, native to your own country. Why not use it?" Then* Dvořák *took his own advice in writing his symphony "From the New World." The famous theme of the second movement (later sung to the words "Goin' Home,") was* Dvořák *adopting the musical sense of the spiritual. In an insightful essay on spirituals, William Arms Fisher in 1926 wrote: "If slavery and poverty were the sorrow of the Negro, religion was his consolation and refuge. If the present was hard to bear and seemed hopeless, the future, because of as simple and childlike faith in a personal Father, was rich in promise and hope."*

Fisher also pointed out that the emergence of the spiritual as a musical force in American music came in steps. First came the publishing of spirituals with the first significant collection, <u>*Slave Songs of the United States*</u>*, printed in 1867. Second, people had to hear these songs sung. A group of young black singers, the Jubilee Singers from Fisk University in Tennessee, helped spread these songs of sorrow and hope. In 1871 they set out into towns of New England to raise money for their institution and introduced spirituals to thousands of people for the first time. A third most important event was the arrival of* Antonín Dvořák *to these shores and the emphatic placement of his European stamp of approval on these musical treasures.*

B) <u>The First Lines</u>

Whether in journalism or program notes, getting the reader's attention quickly is a hoped-for result in the first line(s):

For a Dvořák **Nocturne**: *What do you do if you are a composer who finds himself with an extra movement from a string quartet? (Musici de Montreal, 10/15/1995, DCA)*

For a Schubert **Impromptu:** *If any composer could be subtitled "Posthumous," it would be Schubert. At his death, much of his music remained unpublished and unknown for decades. (Andrew Armstrong, 4/4/1998, DCA)*

For an **All-Vivaldi** program: *In the watery musical history of Venice, one name floats above all others—Antonio Vivaldi. (St. Lukes'Chamber, DCA, 5/22/1999)*

For a program featuring **three piano trios** in sequence--- Beethoven, Borodin and Shubert:
Today's concert features a musical Russian bliny, sandwiched between two musical Viennese strudels. (McDermott Trio, DCA, 9/21/1997)

First lines can also serve as a cohesive force to pull together a program with a great variety of composers. For example, a DCA April 1, 2001 Spoleto Festival USA Chamber Music program provided four works beginning with Samuel Barber's **Souvenirs for Piano, Four Hands**, followed by works of Brahms, Stravinsky and Mendelssohn. The note on **Souvenirs** ended with the following:

> *In 1951, Barber composed Souvenirs, a suite containing a waltz, schottische, pas de deux,* two-*step, hesitation tango, and galop. .. [Barber writes:] "Imagine a divertissement in a setting of the Palm Court of the Hotel Plaza in New York, the year about 1914, epoch of the first tangos."*

This was directly followed by the notes for **Brahms' Trio for Clarinet, Cello and Piano in A Minor** that began:

> *If Barber saw his "souvenirs" in the salons of grand hotels, Brahms in his autumnal days gained inspiration from the instrument he called "Fräulein Klarinette."*

Then came **Igor Stravinsky's L'Histoire de Soldat for Violin, Clarinet and Piano** with the first words:

> *If Brahms, in his last years, found new composing energy through a clarinet, Igor Stravinsky in his middle years as a composer found himself homeless, cut off from his Russian homeland by the World War and the Russian Revolution.*

The final work, **Mendelssohn's Piano Trio No. 2,** had these initial words:

> *If Stravinsky in his mid-life of composing struck out in new directions, Felix Mendelssohn in his last two years of life had no such ideas for change, only for polishing his craft.*

C) The Use of Quotations

Quotations add deeply to our understanding of how music comes to fruition especially if the quote is from the composer. No composer is unaffected by previous musical heroes or by the nation's culture--- or by his or her youthful experiences. Consider the following quotes, first by Arnold Schoenberg, then by Samuel Barber, who reflects on writing his first string quartet. (Nice, too, when the composer exercises some humor.)

> ***String Quartet, Opus 11 Samuel Barber (1910-1981)***
> *The composer Arnold Schoenberg wrote: "An artist is to me like an apple tree: When his time comes, whether he wants it or not, he bursts into bloom and starts to produce apples...." Samuel Barber clearly felt that way in May 1936 when he wrote to a friend: "I have vague quartettish rumblings in my innards and need a bit of celestial Ex Lax to restore my equilibrium; there is nothing to do but get at it..." While in Italy on a composition grant, Barber heard his first symphony performed then began his quartet… (Laurentian Quartet, 4/12/97, DCA)*

Sometimes quotations can provide an insight on the works of a composer. For a note about **String Quartet No. 3 by Bela Bartok,** a composer whose works often are difficult to understand, a quote by Craig Matteson gave a good introduction:

> *What a listener should not do is expect Bartok to turn in to Mozart or Schubert at any moment. Just relax and let the music come to you. After several hearings you will begin to develop connections in the music and realize that it is largely tonal music. (Alianza String Quartet, 11/16/2008, DCA)*

Then insights into the very nature of the composer can come from his own mouth. Brahms was both a perfectionist and a man of emotional swings. For notes on the **Brahms Piano Quintet, Op 34** these two segments speak to his perfectionism and emotions:

> *One story goes that a friend met middle-aged Brahms in a Viennese café and asked how the day had gone: "I was working on my symphony," Brahms replied. "In the morning, I added an eighth note. In the afternoon, I took it out." (It took him 20 years to finish Symphony No. 1.)*

AND

In 1858, Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann*: "All of you particularly think me different from what I am. I am never, or very seldom, in the least bit pleased with myself. I never feel quite happy, but fluctuate between complacency and depression."* (Fine Arts Quartet, 5/21/2017, DCA)

D) <u>Introducing local "color" and/or personal experience</u>

Connecting a composer to local history may not happen often, but when you can, it stands out.
A visit to the Danbury region by Jean Sibelius found a place in program notes for **Sibelius's Third Symphony** :

> *On a day in late May 1914, Jean Sibelius rode through Danbury on a train bound for Norfolk, Connecticut. Accompanying him was his host, Carl Stoekel, whose summer concerts brought many composers to northwestern Connecticut. It was the great Finnish composer's first (and, as it turned out, only) trip to the United States and he was particularly taken with the beauty of the area, particularly the Housatonic between New Milford and Canaan. Sibelius, whose fame in Scandinavia, England and the United States had long been established ("Finlandia," "Valse Triste," "Ein Saga," "Symphony 2") conducted a concert in Norfolk of his own music on June 3, afterwards touring New England ("Seeing Niagara Falls," he said, "is as close to a religious experience as I've ever had.") Before he left in mid-June, Yale University conferred a Doctor of Music degree upon him. (DSO, Nov. 12, 1989)*

Preceding WWII, many European-born composers came to stay in the United States, some temporarily (Benjamin Britten, Bohuslav Martinů**)** or others permanently (Bela Bartok, Arnold Schoenberg, Darius Milhaud, Igor Stravinsky). Notes of works by these composers have often a "local" flourish as these for **Martinů's Nonet No. 2**, since Ridgefield is next door to Danbury. (Frisson, 11/11/2018, DCA,)

> *Escaping the Nazi hordes, Martinů came to the United States in 1941, living in trying conditions on Long Island, where he learned English by seeing the same movies over and over…During his 1941-1946 stay in the United States, Martinů wrote five symphonies. Interestingly, his Symphony No. 3 was composed in Ridgefield, Connecticut in 1944, where he had come with his wife to get away from the big city life of New York. Martinů returned to Prague in 1946, but came back often.*

Personal experiences can also be interweaved as here for Arthur Honegger's **Pastorale d'ete** (A Far Cry, 5/7/2011, DCA)
This writer gained his earliest symphonic listening experiences during college years in the early 1950s by attending concerts of the San Francisco Symphony (yes, for 50c in the second row from the stage in the Opera House.) The conductor was French born Pierre Monteux (he who had conducted the world premiere of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring") and he would often program a modern French composer's work. So it was that I was introduced to Arthur Honegger, of Swiss parentage but Paris born and musically trained there. The work I heard was "Pacific 231," a musical depiction of a three-hundred ton locomotive straining at its initial movements and finally "hurling itself through the night at a speed of 100 miles per hour." Though Honegger would write some three hundred works of all classical types, for most of us, he is an unknown quantity.

I'm sure that each concertgoer at some time has had a very positive, even emotional, experience at a concert to some specific music. The DSO performed Elgar's **Enigma Variations** on November 6, 1994. Of the 14 variations, probably the most famous is "Nimrod," the ninth variation, written in memory of a close friend. My first hearing of "Nimrod" came when I was in graduate school at UCLA and attending concerts by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Here is what I added to the **Enigma** notes:

The one variation that most likely stays with the hearer is the "Nimrod" variation. The writer of these program notes will never forget the occasion when he first heard the Nimrod variation. In early 1957, the Los Angeles Philharmonic toured the Far East and in one concert played before the young president of the Philippine Islands, Ramon Magsaysay. Though this name may be lost in history for most, Magsaysay had brought to the Philippines what John F. Kennedy would later bring to the USA—youth, vigor, and great personal appeal. On March 17, 1958, Magsaysay died in an airplane crash. Back in the United States and learning of the tragedy, Alfred Wallenstein, the conductor of the Philharmonic, announced from the podium an addition to the orchestra's program: Elgar's Nimrod Variation in memory of the young fallen president of the Philippines. This writer remembers a lump in his throat that persisted many minutes after the Nimrod's climactic moment had faded away into silence.

E) Taking Advantage of the Unusual

Programs often have surprises that attract attention. The program writer needs to take advantage of the unusual. For example, on a DCA program by the pianist Alex Alguacil, the first five works—short pieces--were by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900):

O.K., admit it. Like me, you didn't know that the famous German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was a composer in his youth. Nietzsche, a man who in his later years railed against his former hero Richard Wagner, as well as Christianity and Romanticism, maintained a love of music (with Bizet's Carmen being a favorite of his). Even at the age of fourteen he showed a determined sense of where music fit into life when he wrote: "God gave us music so that we, first and foremost, will be guided upward by it…. It can be capricious; it can cheer us up and delight us…It can even break the resistance of the toughest character... Music also provides pleasant entertainment and saves everyone who is interested in it from boredom. All humans who despise it should be considered mindless, animal-like creatures." He had become in his youth an excellent pianist and most of his compositional output occurred by the time he was 25, including songs for family occasions…... Strangely enough, it would be one of his books, Also Sprach Zarathustra, which would inspire other composers to produce music of more lasting performances. The fourth movement of Mahler's Third Symphony is a paean to the Nietzsche work, as well as Frederich Delius's "A Mass of Life." And what of those thrilling initial measures of Richard Strauss's tone poem Also Sprach Zarathustra that made the first minutes of Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece, 2001: A Space Odyssey so memorable? (DCA, 9/26/2010)

Then there comes a work by a completely unknown, such as Ludwig Thuille (1861-1907). But there are always connections that the reader would enjoy knowing. In a program by the Borealis Wind Quintet and Leon Bates, pianist**, Thulle's Sextet for Piano and Winds**, Op. 6, appeared.

In Innsbruck, Austria, in 1874, two teenagers met through family connections. Their love of music and talent led to their becoming composers and life-long friends. One of the two became world famous: Richard Strauss (1864-1949). The other, Ludwig Thuille, remains remembered mainly because of several chamber works, especially his Sextet for Piano and Winds. Thuille, an orphan at five years of age, first lived with relatives in Innsbruck where his musical studies began and where he met young Strauss. The friendship clearly flowered as they moved into composition mode because Strauss dedicated Don Juan, one of his first orchestral masterpieces, to Thuille. (DCA 10/24/2010)

The chamber orchestra Philadelphia Virtuosi presented a Viennese-type concert of large orchestral works----Johann Strauss's Kaiser-Waltzer and Gustav Mahler**'s Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen and**

Symphony No. 4----arranged for smaller orchestras by Arnold Schoenberg and his student Erwin Stein. How the arrangements came to be was indeed unusual as the prolog identifies.

> *This program is filled with beautiful melodies and who do we have to thank for it? Well, of course, Strauss and Mahler, but clearly also Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), whose 12-tone system took music as far away from beautiful melodies as possible. This is the story. In 1919 Schoenberg initiated the Viennese Society for Private Musical Performances, which lasted four years and presented concerts in Vienna only for members and guests. Naturally, new works were performed by Schoenberg and protégés Alban Berg and Anton Webern, these being the "radical composers." No applause or booing was allowed. To round out the programs, Schoenberg and friends made chamber-sized arrangements of large orchestral compositions. In this way the Society members could enjoy works without paying a lot of musicians to play them. For example, Schoenberg arranged three Strauss waltzes for small group performance, while his student Erwin Stein (1885-1958) similarly arranged Mahler's Fourth Symphony. Schoenberg also honored Mahler by an arrangement of his song cycle, the "Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen." Mahler, who headed the Vienna Opera in the first years of the 20th century, had given his powerful support to Schoenberg and his group of young "modern" composers. (May 16, 2009, DCA)*

The unusual may arrive in the shape of major anniversaries of the birth or death of great composers. In 1991, the 200th anniversary of Mozart's death, the DSO provided an All-Mozart concert. (March 24, 1991.) The success of both Amadeus, the play (1980), and Amadeus, the movie (1984), had revived interest in the Austrian *wunderkind*, so a little history of interest in Mozart music over the years seemed an appropriate beginning.

> *Why Mozart? In Amadeus, this question was posed to God by Antonio Salieri, rival composer to Mozart at the Vienna court. What he really meant was: Why did you give so much musical talent to this man Mozart? Today we ask "Why Mozart?" to discover why the 200th anniversary of this man's death has such great interest. Even USA Today had a front-page article about the anniversary! Concerts of Mozart's music this year are "de rigeur." The Danbury Music Centre alone is giving three concerts while, not to be outdone by anyone, the music forces of Lincoln Center will perform all 800-plus works of Mozart in this year and next.*
>
> *One hundred years ago, romantic music held sway and little note was made in this country of the centenary of Mozart's death. England did a little better because George Bernard Shaw (then a music critic for a London paper and paradoxically a champion of both Mozart and Wagner) did hail the event. He explained that with German romanticisms enfolded into the arms of the Victorian desire for events of great magnitude (hundreds of musicians playing, thousands of voices singing), Mozart really didn't have a chance. "You can't make an effect with Mozart," Shaw observed. However, several London concerts did celebrate the centenary by featuring Mozart's Requiem (as Shaw wrote) "in the spirit of pious melancholy in which we [British] celebrate great occasions." In the twentieth century with the arrival of the phonograph, radio, and the long playing records after WWII, baroque and classical era composers came to be known far better. Then came television and the increasing need for bright sprightly and non-copyrighted background music for television commercials. Mozart and friends were ready for the big time.*

For anyone, wishing to begin writing program notes, the preceding ideas may offer some points-of-view to consider. A writer has to write, re-write and often re-think the program notes before completing them.

What follows in Part II are examples of program notes I've written for a full concert. Some are concerts by the Danbury Symphony Orchestra, some by the professional groups presented by the Danbury Concert Association. These will typify the variety of programs facing a program note writer.