

## PROGRAM NOTES: EDUCATING MUSICIANS AND AUDIENCES IN PROFESSIONAL MUSIC TRAINING—THE TUT EXPERIENCE

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### Abstract

This paper is written in response to the request to consider musical experiences at Western Classical Music concerts, and more specifically, the role of the program note that informs listeners and performers about the historical context of the composition and includes the composers' biographical details and compositional thinking. Program notes are similar to reading the "spoilers" before seeing movies. What follows is based on observations and reflections from the Tainan University of Technology (TUT), Taiwan, and its educators' experiences of teaching graduate music students. The idea put forward is that the content of the program note reflects the performers' interpretations of the composer's ideas, and access to this note provides an opportunity for music educators to reconfigure and strengthen their pedagogical approaches. By recognizing the intended role of the program note and its relation to the interpretation, understanding, and collaboration in music course curricula, music educators continue to grow in their range of practices. Knowing a composer's intention can be used to develop the performance of the composition and understand the genre and cultural/social/historical/political connections of the composer and composition, thus providing useful experiences for music students.

**Keywords:** *Curriculum, composers, music concert, program note.*

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### 1. Introduction

The background included in program notes provide fascinating insights into a composer's intentions,

and understanding the wider context of the music to be performed can sometimes quite radically affect its interpretation. In Western classical music concerts, the provision of program notes is a widespread practice dating back to the 18th century and is still commonly in use (Blom et al., 2016). Program notes help contextualize music and are helpful to even the most educated of audiences (Scaife, 2001). At classical music concerts, a program note is the usual medium for communicating information about the music to be heard and performed. Although there may be information in common, the program note is distinct from the CD cover note, from notes contained within a musical score, and from a composer's directions to performers (Blom et al., 2020). German romantic composer and pianist, Robert Schumann (1810-1856) demanded program notes (Koller, 2021). The demand required explaining how Schumann's writings pertain to the piece such as *Papillons, Op. 2* and bring meaning to this romantic masterpiece.

Blom et al. (2016) noted that program notes tend to inform listeners and performers about the historical context and composer's biographical details and compositional thinking. However, the scant program note research conducted to date reveals that program notes may not foster as much understanding or enhance listener enjoyment as previously assumed. In the case of canonic works, performers and listeners may already be familiar with much of the information contained in the program note. In addition, according to Maus (1997), the lack of time and training are reasons for not using written program notes. That no studies were found that addressed how to give music education majors opportunities to practice these skills and none explored the benefits of increased knowledge about the concert repertoire for the performers involved is surprising because musicians use a highly specialized vocabulary that can be an obstacle to understanding for general audience members. Strategies for making program notes accessible to non-musicians that include keeping the audience's knowledge-level in mind have been discussed; for example, Henry and Zeiss (2018) noted that musical works first require instilling an appreciation for the value of program notes as an educational tool for students and audience members.

The concept of program notes is usually thought of as part of a curriculum, and program notes can permeate the classroom; include overt forms of communication, such as lecture-recitals and pre-concert talks; and enhance an audience's enjoyment of a concert and enrich their musical

understanding (Henry & Zeiss, 2018). As stated in England's Action Ideal VIII by the Mayday Group (2018), ideally, music education makes important contributions to musical cultures (Kardos, 2018). This connection should be seen as the manifest link between music research and the learning taking place in educational institutions. Kardos (2018) noted that beyond issues of the vocational viability of graduates, specializations can foster potentially crippling literacy issues, for example, music performance graduates who cannot operate technology or music technologists who cannot read music, etc. Conventional music curricula create boundaries between practices, which in the real world are becoming increasingly blurred and/or irrelevant. It is critical that professional music training provide a wide range of practical experiences in combination with professional musicianship and the cultivation of artistic personalities to encourage broader understanding of exciting music cultures and the possibility for inquiry-based learning.

## 2. Literature review

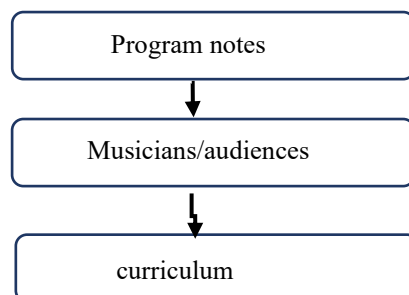
Because of the lack of extant research into program notes *per se*, a wide range of writings around the topic were sourced. These included studies of composers' intentions, program notes for the music of composers who are no longer living, and listeners or audiences and classes' teaching experiences. The writing of program notes is an important part of evaluating music diploma candidates' performances in exams and reflects the fact that most performers and directors are asked at some point to write program notes for a recital or concert. It also allows examiners to assess how well students understand the musical and historical context of the repertoire students are performing. The importance of writing program notes should not be underestimated: Informative and clearly presented notes can significantly enhance the listening experience of the audience. Many musicians find writing program notes not just a powerful tool for increasing their audiences' appreciation and enjoyment of the concert but also a useful way to clarify their thoughts about the music that they are to perform (Blom et al, 2016).

## 3. Relationships between musicians and audiences

The aim of this research is to explore the assumed relationship between program notes and musicians /audiences (see Figure 1). It was assumed that program notes, as naturally associated with knowing how to listen and think about the music performed at the strategic level, is the category initiating the relationship. The case of the TUT was examined. The main reasons for the choice are that the study of TUT's Music Department and its curriculum has been ongoing since 2009. TUT offers a seven-year program from high school directly to a bachelor's degree in vocational education, and artistry first requires mastery of the general concert audience, suggesting that TUT is a leader in professional music training. As a knowledgeable musician, I still enjoy reading program notes and continue to learn through them because no one can know everything in a vast musical repertoire. Students who are presenting recitals are encouraged to write notes for their audiences and themselves, and graduate students are often asked to tell me some interesting things about a composer they are studying. With the internet, it is so much easier for students to obtain information about a composer than it was in the past. It is exciting to see students think about music in a new way and begin to comprehend musical styles. Knowing the historical context of a piece makes for better interpretations and a better listening experience.

I also believe this is an important part of a student's training and development and have created some excellent guidelines for students for writing program notes. Teachers may find these notes useful for their students.

Figure 1. Relationships between program notes, musicians/audiences, and curriculum.



The Master of Music degree programs at TUT are modeled after the guiding principles outlined by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM, 2020). The purpose of the Master of Music degree work is to refine skills in music performance, music composition, research and writing, and pedagogy. The curriculum falls into three main categories in the TUT's Music Department: Musicianship,

Applied Studies and Ensembles, and Major Requirements. The primary focus of an integrated or holistic curriculum is not on the disciplines themselves but on the themes, issues, or phenomena (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2000). A thematic approach is used to integrate curricular content by common topical areas or themes into interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary units of study (Merritt, 2019). In the 1930s, American educator and composer Randall Thompson, supported by the Carnegie Foundation, conducted a study to determine the extent to which musical education was an essential component of education as a whole (Nelson, 2005). Nelson (2005) concluded by discussing the significance of a critical, holistic approach for processes of acquired expertise for policy development. The study was influential across the USA, encouraging the integration of musical studies with other disciplines.

#### 4. Schumann's piano piece *Papillons*, op. 2 program notes for a classical Western concert

As an example, with respect to integration in a Research Methods and Thesis Writing class at graduate student level, performers are expected to write their program notes for a general concert audience, that is, an audience of non-musicians who are interested in music and are fairly knowledgeable. The teacher might take time in class to explain Schumann's Piano piece *Papillons*, Op. 2 as students rehearse the piece. For example, the teacher might alert students to what was going on in inventive and descriptive titles that come from his piano music at the time that Schumann composed this piece and discuss how it is similar or different to anything that audiences had heard before. Much like a college music lecture-recitals, the teacher can discuss with the students and raise awareness about how Schumann uses titles for his movements to reflect the tempo or speed at which he wants the music to be played. The teacher might also focus on literature and reflect on including program notes to notify the audience of what was written before the piece.

For example, Perahia (2014) noted that two artistic influences permeate Robert Schumann's second published work, an interconnected cycle of 12 dance pieces appearing in 1831 under the title *Papillons* (i.e., "Butterflies"). The first is the piano music of Schubert, especially his dance pieces and variations, which intrigued the young composer with their "psychologically unusual connection of ideas." The second is the work of German Romantic novelist Jean Paul Richter with whose fanciful writings Schumann became utterly besotted in his student years in Leipzig while studying law. Program notes inform the audience and facilitate a better listening experience by including what is interesting and relevant about the composer. For example, it is the scene of the masked ball at the end of Richter's novel *Flegeljahre* (1804, as cited in Perahia, 2014) that provides the dramatic "setting" for the cycle, a scene in which two brothers, in love with the same woman, vie to win her heart amid the gaiety and varied musical offerings of a social evening with a dance orchestra. The purpose of learning this piece goes beyond just playing good music well. It might incorporate an intentional introduction to new musical discourses and tools for students to add to their cognitive understanding of how music works (see Table 1). The program note helps both the student and audience understand that music is located within time and a culture.

Table 1. Integrated curriculum, instruction/teaching, learning, related strategies, and the program notes.

Curriculum	Instruction/Teaching
Research Methods and Thesis Writing, for example, using Schumann's piano music Op. 2 <i>Papillons</i> .	The program notes' requirements are integrated with descriptive titles.
Integrated	Integrated Curriculum
Incorporate program note writing into students' degree curricula, such as the course Research Methods and Thesis Writing.	The curriculum includes program notes, lecture-recitals, and pre-concert talks.
Integration	Learning
Regarding musicianship, instructors need to help their students develop a confident, respectful, and expressive stage presence.	A certain level of body awareness is key as this will assist students' expressive abilities and encourage them to use their physiology to support their musicality and technical prowess.
Strategies	Strategies
The didactic skills that can be cultivated specifically through the study of program notes include (a) the ability to keep the audience's knowledge-level in mind, and (b) the importance of precise, concise language.	The holistic instruction of performance and pedagogy appear as more overt forms of communication, such as program notes, lecture-recitals, and pre-concert talks, and enhance an audience's enjoyment of a concert as well as enrich their musical understanding.

## 5. Application of skills/knowledge competencies in the program notes writing

The 2020 *National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) Handbook* provides access to the NASM standards and guidelines that include proposed revisions to the NASM standards currently open for comment, including the Association's helpful Basic Competency Index by Discipline and Specialization for Undergraduate Degrees in Music (NASM, 2020). The *NASM Handbook* indicates standards applicable to all professional undergraduate music degrees. Expert status is established by these criteria: (a) common body of knowledge and skills, including performance, musicianship skills and analysis, composition/improvisation, history and repertory, and synthesis, (b) general studies competencies, and (c) recommendations for professional studies.

Each of the NASM core competencies is addressed below with descriptions of some of the specific educational interventions currently employed in the music theory block at the TUT's Music Department. This study's intent is not to evaluate the effectiveness of individual interventions but to create awareness about the variety of options for incorporating core competencies into the Research Methods and Thesis Writing of Music portion of graduate music curricula. For example, program notes help contextualize music and are helpful to even the most educated of audiences. Thus, for infrequent concert goers, program notes ground unfamiliar music in real life by providing information about the conception of the piece and what the composer might have wanted to convey (Koller, 2021). For example, a teacher might encourage her students to an in-class presentation about why and how to write program notes. The presentation might begin with a discussion about the purpose of notes. Next, she could give students information about how to write program notes. Thereafter, students could be advised to start by asking a series of questions, beginning with general ones such as "What do I want the audience to know about this piece? What should they listen for when they hear it? What is the most significant feature of this piece?" Furthermore, the teacher may urge students to consider more specific questions about the "who, what, why, where, and when" of the music. "What" questions could include what type of piece it is (descriptive titles, epigraph, etc.) as well as form. "Why" refers to the reason a piece was composed: Was it for a special occasion or a specific performer, for example. "Where" questions would include a work's cultural context.

## 6. Conclusion

Among the basic competencies by discipline and specialization in the TUT Music Department curriculum, program notes are the logical starting point for implementing competency-based education because the "often" or "always" included musical competencies (Robinson, 2019) already include essential standards. In addition, activities with those musical competencies and theory-based strategies are in place. It is possible that program notes are unique among the core music curriculum traditionally included in university coursework with its many opportunities to help students toward all three NASM core competencies, which are (a) a common body of knowledge and skills, (b) general studies competencies, and (c) recommendations for professional studies. Future work is needed to integrate all essential competencies, experiences, and opportunities across disciplines to further connect them to professional practices and make them outcomes-based so that every learner develops the skills, expertise, and knowledge to survive and thrive in the 21st century.

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