

CONCERTGOING: A HANDBOOK FOR STUDENTS TO ACCOMPANY MUSIC: AN APPRECIATION

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Roger Kamien

TO THE STUDENT

An important element of a music course is, often, attending a musical performance—such as a concert, a recital, or an opera—and then writing a report. This booklet has been prepared to help you understand and enjoy the experience of concertgoing and write effectively about it.

The booklet has two main sections: first, “Attending a Concert”; and, second, “Writing a Concert Report.” Actually, a concert is only one of many kinds of musical performances; but in general, we’ll use the terms *concert*, *concertgoing*, *concertgoer* to cover all of them.

ATTENDING A CONCERT

What’s special about a live concert? In a live performance, artists put themselves on the line; their training and magnetism must overcome technical difficulties to involve the listeners’ emotions. What is performed, how it sounds, and how the artist feels about the performance and the occasion—these are elements that exist for only a fleeting moment and can never be repeated. As an audience responds to the excitement of such moments, feelings are exchanged between stage and hall. These feelings have a real impact on the performance.

Which Concert to Attend?

You have many kinds of concerts to choose from, by many kinds of performing groups, including choruses, symphony and chamber orchestras, concert bands, chamber music ensembles, opera companies, and soloists.

The *symphony orchestra* and the categories of instruments that make it up are described in *Music: An Appreciation* (see Part I). A *chamber orchestra* is smaller, consisting of 20 to 30 players. A *concert band* consists mostly of woodwinds, brasses, and percussion. *Chamber music ensembles* are small groups (usually, no more than about 10 players) consisting of various combinations of instruments; examples are string quartets, wind quintets, and trios of piano, violin, and cello. Chamber ensembles have one performer to a part and—unlike the larger groups—generally appear without a conductor. *Choruses* are large groups of singers; a chorus often performs with instrumentalists

and typically has a conductor. *Opera companies*, needless to say, present operas (and operettas); musicals are most commonly presented by *theater companies* but may be performed by opera companies. There are also performances by *solo instrumentalists* and *solo vocalists*, often with piano accompaniment. Strictly speaking, *concerts* are presentations by orchestras, bands, chamber groups, and choruses; presentations by soloists, with or without accompanists, are called *recitals*.

In addition to all this, of course, there are jazz, pop, and rock concerts and various other kinds of programs.

Concerts by campus performing groups or soloists are easily accessible, free or relatively inexpensive, and often of high quality. Announcements of such concerts will be found in the campus newspaper and on bulletin boards in the music department or the school of music. Off-campus performances are announced in local newspapers, particularly in weekend editions. These concerts tend to be more expensive than campus events, but discount tickets are often available for students. Though tickets can usually be bought on the day or night of a concert, you have a wider choice if you buy them in advance—at the box office or by mail.

If possible, prepare for a concert by listening to some of the works to be performed and by reading about their composers.

At the Concert

What to Expect Orchestral concerts last about two hours, with one intermission of about twenty-five minutes. They generally include three or four compositions representing several stylistic periods and genres, such as a classical overture, a twentieth-century concerto, and a romantic symphony. Opera performances last somewhat longer and sometimes have two intermissions. Chamber concerts and solo recitals are usually about the same length as an orchestra concert, or slightly shorter. After the last composition on the printed program of a solo recital, if the audience has responded enthusiastically, the performer or performers may play one or more short additional works; these are called *encores*, French for *again* (chamber groups may also perform encores).

If the concert hall or opera house is a large one, your seat may be at some distance from the stage. You may want to bring opera glasses,

if you have them; binoculars or field glasses will serve just as well, or even better.

When you arrive at an orchestra concert, typically the stage will be lit and some of the musicians will be onstage tuning and warming up. At an opera house, the musicians will be warming up in the orchestra pit—though the curtain will be down or the stage dark. (If you're familiar with any of the music that is about to be played, you may recognize snatches of it at this point.) The next thing that happens is the tuning of the orchestra by the concertmaster; then, the conductor will come onstage (to applause), and the first piece on the program, or the overture to the opera, will be played.

At a chamber music concert or a recital, the stage will be empty when you arrive, and the players will come onstage together (greeted by applause) to perform the first piece.

It was once rare for performers at concerts or recitals to address the audience, except to identify an encore (and even encores might be played unannounced). Today, however, it is becoming more common for a conductor, a soloist, or one member of a chamber group to speak briefly if a piece has some special significance or is being performed under special circumstances.

You'll notice that professional soloists generally perform from memory, whereas musicians in orchestras, chamber groups, and choruses perform with music. The conductor may or may not conduct from a score.

At orchestra concerts, the conductor usually leaves the stage between pieces, perhaps returning to acknowledge applause; but the musicians remain in place (unless some rearrangement of personnel or seating is necessary) until the intermission, when they all leave. During the applause, the conductor may signal individual members of the orchestra to stand up, in recognition of special passages they played. If an orchestral piece (such as a concerto) involves a soloist, he or she will come onstage with the conductor, and afterward go offstage and return with the conductor, or perhaps alone. (Applause for a soloist is often prolonged.) At chamber concerts and recitals, all the performers will probably go offstage between works, returning for bows. An opera proceeds steadily from scene to scene (even if the curtain falls at the end of a scene), with intermissions only between acts; the performers take bows before an intermission as well as at the end of the opera.

When the composer of a piece on the program is present (this frequently happens, for instance, when a new work is introduced), he or she may come onstage for a bow, or stand up in the audience.

The Program Booklet The program booklet, given free, often contains a variety of helpful and interesting information. At a concert or recital, it will list the performers and works to be heard; it may also include program notes describing these compositions. If the concert includes a vocal work, the program may provide the text, with a translation if the original is in a foreign language. At an opera, the program will list characters (customarily in order of appearance), acts, and scenes and will usually give a synopsis (a brief description) of the plot (but it will not, typically, include the libretto).

Programs may also have biographical sketches of the principal performers, a listing of the members of the orchestra or opera company personnel, articles on musical topics, and lists of coming musical events.

The titles of musical works on a concert program often include the following abbreviations:

Op. stands for *opus*, Latin for *work*. An opus number is a way of identifying a piece or set of pieces. Usually, within a composer's output, the higher an opus number, the later the work was written.

BWV indicates a number in a thematic catalogue of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, *Bach-Werke-Verzeichniss (List of Bach's Works)*; this catalogue was compiled by Wolfgang Schmieder.


Hob. indicates the number in a thematic catalogue of the works of Joseph Haydn compiled by Anthony van Hoboken.

K. stands for *Köchel number* and indicates a number in a thematic catalogue of the works of Mozart, first compiled in the nineteenth century by Ludwig von Köchel. (His catalogue has been revised several times since then.)

If you are preparing a concert report, it is often convenient to write notes directly on the concert program (however, see "Concert Etiquette," below, about *when* to take such notes). You should save the program in any case, because some instructors will ask you to include it with your report.

Following are examples of pages from two typical program booklets, one for an opera and the second for an orchestral concert.

GREENVILLE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



David Sz. Pollitt, Music Director

MASTERWORKS SERIES

Saturday, October 19, 8:00 PM and Sunday, October 20, 3:00 PM, The Peace Center

"TOP TEN"

MOZART Overture to *Così fan tutte*

MENDELSSOHN Violin Concerto in E Minor, Op. 64

Allegro molto appassionato

Andante

Allegretto non troppo; Allegro molto vivace

ROBERT McDUFFIE, Violin

Intermission

TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Opus 36

Andante sostenuto; Moderato con anima

Andantino in modo di canzone

Allegro

Allegro con fuoco; Andante

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The use of flashbulbs or recording equipment in the auditorium is prohibited.

METROPOLITAN OPERA

Friday Evening, September 27, 1991, 8:00-11:35
The 289th Metropolitan Opera performance of

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART **Don Giovanni**

Opera in two acts

Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte

Conductor: James Levine
Production: Franco Zeffirelli
Set Designer: Franco Zeffirelli
Costume Designer: Anna Anni
Lighting Designer: Gil Wechsler
Stage Director: Lesley Koenig

Characters in order of vocal appearance:

Leporello Timothy Noble
Donna Anna Carolyn James
Don Giovanni Ferruccio Furlanetto
The Commendatore Dimitri Kavrakos
Don Ottavio Stanford Olsen
Donna Elvira Judith Forst
Zerlina Ruth Ann Swenson
Masetto Julien Robbins

Chorus Master: Raymond Hughes
Choreographer: Norbert Vesak
Musical Preparation: John Keenan, Craig Rutenberg,
George Darden, and Donna Racik
Assistant Stage Director: Laura Alley
Stage Band Conductor: Donald Foster
Prompter: Donna Racik

Continuo: Craig Rutenberg, harpsichord
David Heiss, cello
Laurence Glazener, bass
Mandolin Solo: Joyce Rasmussen Balint

This production of *Don Giovanni* was made possible by a generous and deeply appreciated gift from Mrs. Donald D. Harrington.

The Metropolitan Opera's Mozart Bicentennial Celebration is made possible by a generous and deeply appreciated gift from the Lila Acheson and DeWitt Wallace Fund for Lincoln Center, established by the founders of *Reader's Digest*.

Yamaha is the official piano of the Metropolitan Opera. Latecomers will not be admitted during the performance.

Concert Etiquette If possible, arrive at the concert hall at least fifteen minutes before the performance, so that you can relax and read the program notes. (Although you may refer briefly to the program while the performance is in progress, reading it steadily will distract you from the music and is considered poor manners.) Bear in mind, too, that at many concert halls, latecomers aren't allowed to take their seats until some logical break in the music occurs.

During the performance, audience members are expected to remain silent; absolute silence helps the performers to concentrate and enhances the emotional intensity of the musical experience. Performers can be distracted by talking, coughing, humming, or incidental noises—which will also distract and annoy other audience members.

If you are expected to report on the concert, you will naturally want to take some notes. But you should resist the temptation to jot notes down during the actual performance. Instead, to increase your own enjoyment of the music—and to avoid disturbing those sitting near you—write your notes during breaks between pieces or between movements, or during the intermission.

At a concert or recital, audiences express their enthusiasm by applauding at the *end* of a work; if a work has more than one movement, audiences do not customarily applaud between movements. At an opera, however, audiences often applaud at the end of arias, duets, and ensembles.

Taking photographs and using recording equipment are usually not permitted at either concerts or operas.

After the Concert

Within a few days after the concert, you should be able to find a review of it in one or more local newspapers; and the campus newspaper will probably review any on-campus concert. You'll find it interesting to compare your own ideas about the performance with those of the reviewer or reviewers.

You yourself may also be writing a report on the concert, as part of your course requirements. The next section deals with student reports.

WRITING A CONCERT REPORT

Instructors in introductory music courses often require students to write one or more concert reports during a semester. Here are some guidelines for the preparation of such an assignment: first, a few suggestions on working with your own notes; second, points to consider for the content of your report; third, some information about usages or conventions in writing about music; and finally, an example of a concert report.

Transforming Your Notes into a Report

You should plan to expand your notes into a complete report very soon after the concert—the same evening or during the next day or so.

It is often helpful to begin with an outline and then to write a rough draft. (If your instructor hands out a printed form for concert reports, that will serve as the outline.) Next, polish and edit your draft to produce the final version. Remember to check your grammar and the spellings of names (especially foreign names) and musical terms.

Below are recommendations for the actual content of your report—*what* to write. Following that, there is a section on vocabulary and usages, or conventions, involved in referring to musical works—that is, *how* to write about music.

What to Write: The Content of a Report

The Concert as a Whole You should begin your report with a brief description of the concert attended, including the name and type of the performing group or soloists, the place, the date and time, and the music you heard.

You will also want to note whether the performers were attempting a historically “authentic” program. For example, in music by Johann Sebastian Bach, was a harpsichord (rather than a piano) used? For a symphony by Haydn or Mozart, was the size of the orchestra reduced? Did the performers use old instruments, or reconstructions of old instruments?

Then, you may want to describe your general reaction to the concert. Did you enjoy it? Did this event make you feel like going to other concerts in the near future?

Following this introduction, the paper might focus on the pieces you enjoyed most and your reaction to the performances.

Individual Compositions In discussing individual compositions, you will probably want to cover some of the following points:

- *Musical styles.* How did the composition correspond to what you have learned about the stylistic period in which it was composed—baroque, classical, etc.? Your appreciation of a work is often enhanced when you recognize its musical style.
- *Musical genres and forms.* What was the genre of the piece—symphony, concerto, tone poem, string quartet, étude, etc.? What musical forms were employed—theme and variations, sonata form, ABA, etc.? If you are reporting on an opera, you might note arias, recitatives, ensembles, choruses, etc.
- *Program music.* Was the composition program music—that is, was it inspired by a text, story, or place? If so, how did the music reflect the program?
- *Emotions, images, and ideas.* Did the composition evoke in you specific feelings or thoughts? For an opera, you should describe how the music depicted mood, character, and dramatic action.
- *Memorable features.* What features of the piece were most memorable—for example, did you tend to remember slower, lyrical sections; or triumphant parts; or fast, exciting parts? Were there any striking melodies and rhythms? Were there any unusual vocal, instrumental, or electronic effects?
- *Musical themes.* Were there several contrasting sections or themes within a movement? Did you recognize variations of particular themes or reappearances of musical ideas in different sections or movements?
- *Comparisons with other works.* It is often illuminating to compare a work with other works on the program, or with other works you have studied, noting similarities and differences.

Performance Your discussion of performance will be of a more subjective nature. You may want to focus on the following points:

- *Emotional projection.* Did you think that the soloists or group succeeded in projecting the emotional meaning of the work?
- *Dynamics.* Did the dynamics seem to have enough variety and flexibility? Did anything seem too loud or too soft?

- **Tempos.** What tempos were used? Did you think the tempos sounded right, or did some parts seem too slow or too fast? Could you identify any times when the performers intensified their expression of the music by using rubato—a slight holding back or pressing forward of tempo?
- **Melodies.** Did you think that the melodic lines were projected with a feeling of forward motion, lyricism, continuity, and climax? Did there seem to be a good balance between main melodic lines and accompaniment?
- **Vocal and instrumental performances.** Did the singers seem to have outstanding voices? Did the instrumentalists seem to be producing beautiful sounds? Did the performers' body motions add to or detract from the musical effect?
- **The parts and the whole.** Did you enjoy the give-and-take among various instrumental families (in an orchestra), voice parts (in a chorus), or soloists (in a chamber group)? In a concerto, did the soloist and orchestra seem well coordinated?
- **The conductor.** Did you get the impression that the conductor had the ensemble under control? Did the conducting gestures and motions seem to be conveying the feeling of the music?
- **Opera.** How would you describe the quality of the opera production? Were the sets, costumes, lighting, etc., appropriate and aesthetically pleasing? Was the opera sung in its original language or in translation? If it was sung in translation, could you understand the words? Were supertitles provided, and if so did you find them a plus or a minus? Was the opera presented in its original setting (such as the Latin Quarter of Paris around 1830 for Puccini's *La Bohème*), or was the action transposed to a different period? What did you think of the acting?
- **Disasters.** Performances—including those by famous musicians—do occasionally run into problems. Since professionals are good at “covering” slips, even quite sophisticated audience members may be unaware that anything has gone wrong; still, you may want to ask yourself some questions like the following: Did the performers seem to have a firm technical command of the music? Did they consistently play or sing in tune? Do you think you heard any “wrong notes”?

How to Write about Music: Vocabulary, Usages, and Conventions

In writing about music, it's important to use certain terms correctly, with regard to what they mean and the form in which they are written.

Some Basic Performance Vocabulary Here are a few terms you'll need to use in discussing musical performances; some of these are misused surprisingly often.

Composition, piece, and work. These may all be used, more or less interchangeably, for a single, complete piece of music (“The first composition on the program was very short”; “The second piece was the one I enjoyed most”; “This is a contemporary work”).

Song. This is a relatively brief work for a solo singer, which is not part of a larger work like an opera or an oratorio (though it may be part of a song cycle, and the term is also correct for a solo passage in a musical comedy or operetta). Note that *song* should *not* be used for an instrumental work, or for an aria.

Aria. This is a passage for a solo singer in an opera or oratorio. If it is being performed out of context, as part of a concert or recital, it is still referred to as an *aria*. Some arias are independent compositions; these are called *concert arias*.

Vocal, vocalist. *Vocal* means *of the voice*; it is redundant and therefore incorrect to speak of a “vocal song.” *Vocalist* is simply a synonym for *singer*.

Choral, chorus. *Choral* means *of a choir* (thus a *choral work* is a work for choir), and a *chorus* is a relatively large choir, or group of singers.

Ensemble. This can refer to any group of performers, but it is most commonly used for smaller groups. (A large group would be referred to as, say, an *orchestra, chorus, or band*.)

Chamber music. This refers to any music written for a chamber ensemble—a string quartet, a piano trio, a chamber orchestra, and so on. (Music for a soloist, or for a soloist with accompanist, may or may not be chamber music.)

Symphony. This is a composition for orchestra, usually in four movements. The term should *not* be used as a short form of “symphony orchestra” (the term to use in that case is *orchestra*.)

Program. A word with several meanings: (1) An entire concert or recital ("I enjoyed tonight's program"). (2) The printed booklet given to audience members at a concert, opera, recital, etc. ("I found that reading the program notes helped me understand the music"). (3) A literary text, a place, an event, or the like, on which a musical composition is based ("Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* has an autobiographical program").

Performance. This term typically refers to the actual act of making music ("a virtuoso performance"), though it is sometimes used to mean a musical presentation ("The performance consisted of six works").

Concert, recital. A *recital* is a program by a soloist or by two performers (soloist and accompanist, or a duo). A *concert* is a program by a chamber ensemble, orchestra, band, or chorus; there are also rock, jazz, and pop concerts.

Production. This is a performance of a work that involves staging—costumes, scenery, etc.—as well as music. The term may also refer to the costumes, scenery, and so on, as distinct from the music ("The opera was well sung, but the production seemed overelaborate").

Show. This term is properly used only for popular music and musical comedy.

Act, scene. In opera, operetta, and musical theater, an *act* is a major section of the work ("The third act of *Rigoletto* includes the famous Quartet"); usually, an intermission takes place between acts. Acts may be subdivided into *scenes*. *Note:* In popular forms like revues and variety shows, *act* refers to the presentation of one of the performers or performing groups ("a tough act to follow"); but the term is *not* correctly used in this way for recitals, orchestra or chamber concerts, etc. (Don't say, "For his second act he sang *Die Forelle*." Rather, say, "The second piece he sang was *Die Forelle*"; or, "The second work was *Die Forelle*"; or the like.)

Movement. This is a specifically designated part of a long work like a symphony, a concerto, a string quartet, etc. (The term is *not* used for sections within an opera.)

Section, passage. These terms are useful for referring to parts of a composition shorter than a movement or (in musical drama) shorter than an act, scene, aria, duet, ensemble, etc.

Usages and Conventions In music—as in the other academic disciplines, and in many nonacademic situations—there are various usages, or conventions, regarding terminology. What words are capitalized, for example? When is italic used? To answer such questions, systems of usages are established by publishers (of textbooks and popular books, journals, newspapers, magazines, etc.), by college and university departments, by professional organizations, and so on. These systems can differ considerably from each other—a fact you should bear in mind when you are reading about music, since you will encounter many divergent usages. (*Note:* As you may know, usages of this nature are often called *styles*; however, that term will *not* be used here, to avoid any confusion with musical styles—an entirely different matter.)

When you write a concert report—or any other assignment for your music course—you will need to learn a system of usages and apply it correctly and consistently, particularly for titles of musical works.

The music department at your college or university may have developed its own system of usages; if so, it will probably distribute instructions in the form of a booklet or list to everyone who is taking a music course. Or an individual instructor may announce or hand out instructions for usages that he or she expects you to follow. A second possibility is that the department—or an instructor—will refer you to a system recommended by an organization like the Modern Language Association (MLA) or an institution like the University of Chicago (both of these have developed widely used systems). A third possibility is that your instructor will have you follow the usages that appear in your textbook (in this case, *Music: An Appreciation*, by Roger Kamien).

It is rather unlikely that you will be left to your own devices with regard to usages; but if you are, you should consult the manual of a respected institution like MLA or Chicago, or take your textbook as a model.

On the following pages is a sampling of the usages in *Music: An Appreciation*.

Note, with regard to italic (slanted type that looks *like this*): in handwritten work, or in work done on a typewriter, a word processor, or a personal computer that cannot produce italic, the equivalent is underlining.

- “Generic” titles of works—that is, works identified by a genre or form (usually with some number, or a key, or both)—are capitalized: Brahms’s Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98; Chopin’s Nocturne in E Flat Major, Op. 9, No. 2; Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488.
- “Nongeneric” titles of works—that is, actual titles rather than a numbered genre or form—are set in italic (or underlined; remember that, as noted above, underlining is the equivalent of italic). Examples are titles of songs, oratorios, operas, symphonic poems, and ballets: Gershwin’s *I Got Rhythm*, Handel’s *Messiah*, Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, Smetana’s *The Moldau*, Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*.
- “Nicknames” of works with generic titles are italic. They are placed in parentheses when they appear with the full title, but they may also be used in place of the full title. Examples are: Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in C Minor, Op. 13 (*Pathétique*), and Haydn’s Symphony No. 94 in G Minor (*Surprise*); the *Pathétique* Sonata, the *Surprise* Symphony.
- Some titles combine a generic part and a nongeneric part. Examples: Bizet’s *L’Arlésienne* Suite No. 2, Machaut’s *Notre Dame* Mass.
- For translations of works with foreign-language titles, both the original and the translation are italic. Examples: Schubert’s *Erlkönig* (*The Erlking*); Puccini’s *La Bohème* (*Bohemian Life*).
- A foreign-language title usually conforms to the conventions for capitalization in that language (different usages apply in different languages). Examples: Schumann’s *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai* (*In the Lovely Month of May*); Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*). Note that nouns are capitalized in German.
- Parts of larger works are usually lowercase if identified by form and number. Examples: first movement, scene 2, the third act.
- Parts of works which bear their own nongeneric titles are italic. Examples: *March to the Scaffold* (from Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*); *Game of Pairs* (from Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra); *La donna è mobile* (from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*).
- Vocal works that are identified by the first few words (rather than formal titles) are italic but not capitalized throughout. Example: *When I am laid in earth* (from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*).

- Lowercase is used for forms and genres apart from titles. Examples: A symphony usually has four movements. A minuet and trio is in three-part form (ABA).
- Terms for tempos and dynamics are neither italic nor capitalized in text: *allegro*, *andante*, *pianissimo*.
- Musical styles and stylistic periods are usually lowercase. Examples: baroque, classical, romantic. But there are some exceptions; for example: Renaissance, Dixieland.

As noted above, there are a number of systems of usages, and some of these differ greatly. Here are some examples of usages in other systems:

Long and short works. In some systems, a distinction is made between titles of long works, which are italic; and titles of shorter works, such as songs, for which quotation marks are used (“Yesterday”). But in these systems a foreign-language title may be italic, and quotation marks may be used for a translation, whether the work is short or long: Debussy’s *Nuages* (“Clouds”).

Nicknames. Some systems also use quotation marks rather than italics for nicknames (Mendelssohn’s “Italian” Symphony). However, a nickname may be italic if it is in a foreign language.

Quotation marks. On the other hand, some systems simply use quotation marks for all nongeneric titles, nicknames, foreign-language titles, and the like: Wagner’s “Lohengrin,” “Ah, vous dirai-je, maman,” Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony. (You may find this use of quotation marks particularly in newspapers.)

Italics. Some textbooks use italic for all titles, including generic titles (Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 3 in E Flat Major*). (This is probably done in order to highlight titles for students.)

Keys. Instead of capitalizing all keys in titles, some systems use capital for major keys and lowercase for minor keys and omit the word *major* or *minor*. Thus C in a title is the equivalent of C Major, and c is the equivalent of C Minor.

There are many other variations—far more, in fact, than we can go into here. You need not be familiar with all of them, but you should be aware that they exist.

A Sample Report

Below is a concert report written by a college student, which should be helpful as an example of content, vocabulary, and usages. (You'll notice that this student has followed a format requested by her instructor.)

Name: Peggy Skipitaris

Course: Introduction to Music

Date: December 9, 1991

Concert: New York Philharmonic (December 3, 1991)

Type of concert: Symphony orchestra

General reaction: I was impressed with the construction of the concert hall—Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center—and with its wonderful acoustics. The visual grandeur of the orchestra and the attentiveness of the audience heightened my sense of excitement.

Composition I liked best: The piece I enjoyed most was Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, Op. 28, by Richard Strauss, a one-movement work in rondo form, with various tempos. This symphonic poem was written in 1896—during the romantic era, when program music was prominent—and is based on a German folk tale about a famous prankster. Strauss uses the rondo form as a framework for the episodes of Till's adventures: after each prank, Till laughs at his pursuers and saunters off. When he is finally caught and hanged, his last gesture is to thumb his nose at his executioners. Although the piece deals with death, and such unhappy programs are usually in minor, I hear this composition start in minor but end in major. The meter varies, as does the tempo—which is basically very lively but at times becomes moderate, slower, or even faster.

This work can be compared with another one-movement symphonic poem that deals with the death of its protagonists: Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet. Tchaikovsky chose sonata (rather than rondo) form; his composition is in minor, the meter is duple, and—as in Till Eulenspiegel—the tempo varies. The basic mood of the two works differs significantly: in Romeo and Juliet, it is love—rather than mischief—that triumphs over death.

Strauss introduces his hero with a lyrical opening theme (the horn). But the second theme reflects agility, devilry, energy, and unpredictability. Both themes return often as we hear Till get into and out of "hide and seek" and "catch me if you can" situations. The ending is a grander, more exciting version of Till's first theme. Throughout, Strauss conveys the story and mood by contrasting solo and orchestral passages. The funeral after Till's hanging is interrupted several times by Till's horn theme, suggesting his refusal to die.

In Romeo and Juliet, the slow introduction is a hymn-like melody (Friar Lawrence's theme) which leads to a violent, fast theme that identifies the warring families; Romeo and Juliet themselves are identified by a lovers' theme.

In both works, funeral music indicates death. Tchaikovsky uses Romeo's theme as a dirge but follows it by the gentle lovers' theme which implies that these lovers will be reunited in death. Strauss, on the other hand, concludes Till Eulenspiegel with Till's nose-thumbing theme. Till's spirit—like Romeo's and Juliet's—lives on, but it is obviously a very different kind of spirit.

Listening to Romeo and Juliet brought me close to tears, while Till Eulenspiegel brought a smile to my lips.

Performance of this work: Wonderful! I was glad that Till Eulenspiegel was the final work on the program, as it left me in a very uplifted mood. I marveled at the fact that, through his music, Strauss enabled me to see the actions described in the program.

Overall performance: Totally professional in every respect.