Writing a Readable Analysis Paper

...that doesn't make your analysis professor wish he were dead, or in Cincinnati

Shun Program Notes

Program notes, or CD liner notes, may be as of yet the closest approximation to analytical writing you have encountered. Therefore you might be tempted to write program notes, instead of analysis. You know the style: *After a short introduction in the lower strings, the oboe enters with a lilting, plaintive melody*.

It's very easy to fall into this style, given its pervasiveness in most of our lives. We go to the symphony and read the program notes; we buy a new CD and read the liner notes; we buy one of Michael Steinberg's books—which are collections of his program notes—and read that.

It gets even trickier given that some of those books may contain information we can use in an analysis paper, thus obliging us to separate out the analytical wheat from the liner-notes chaff.

But analysis isn't program notes. Go through your writing and be on the alert for anything that smacks of a tour-guide approach to the piece. That's what program notes are: they are a verbal roadmap through a piece of music.

Perhaps the clearest way to put it is: *don't point out anything that a reader or listener can ascertain easily by reading the score or listening to a performance/recording, and don't confuse descriptive adjectives with analysis.*

Shun Technobabble

Almost the opposite of program-note style is the horribly overwrought, technically-laden paragraph, characterized by impenetrable jargon, run-on sentences, and an almost complete lack of measure numbers or examples. This is what I mean:

After that cadence, an abrupt modulation to the flat submediant is followed by an expanded two-part song form in A-flat major characterized by modal mixtures on the 3rd, 6th, and 7th scale degrees. The first phrase is seven measures long with an expansion from second to fourth measures and modulates from the flat submediant to the sharp subdominant after a short transitory modulation in D-sharp minor, characterized by the usage of motive 'x' (but in its inverted form, as described above) and contrapuntally melded into motive 'y2' in the flat supertonic of the mediant, which is then treated sequentially (tonal sequences, of course) and then the passage ends on the afterbeat of the third beat of the measure. Of course motive 'y3' is heard throughout, while the viola is tacet for the following five measures but was probably omitted due to a copyist's error, and not in the original autograph or any of the earliest published

manuscripts, as witnessed in critical notes to the Barenreiter Critical Edition Vol. 346F.

Now, I'll admit that I've made up that previous paragraph, but I have been obliged to slog through similar writing on a number of occasions.

Organization is Crucial

Analysis writing is difficult, but good organization will work wonders to make your product readable. Use an outliner! Keep paragraphs on single topics and avoid drifting around from idea to idea.

The best overall plan is to do a *top-down* structure, in which you begin with the largest divisions of a composition, then down to the next level of structure, and the next level, and so forth. Once you have done that, you can then decide if you want to present your analysis in a sequential format, or by overall topics, or by some other method of organization.

Keep in mind that a blow-by-blow analysis of a piece, beginning with measure 1 and ending at the final cadence, is not the only way to present your analysis. A topical presentation—i.e., discussing one particular feature of a work at a time—can also work well.

Even better is a mixture of large-scale description, topical points, and then sequential analysis as necessary to make your points clear. This way you allow your reader to journey with you from the higher levels, down into the detail—and also you allow your reader to opt out of the grainier details without losing the big picture.

Focus is Crucial

The section above on shunning technobabble highlights the need to keep your focus clear. Unless your analysis paper is book-length, you'll almost certainly need to restrict your coverage. Decide what you're going to write about, and then stay with it. Try very hard to avoid becoming sidetracked by trivial issues, unless you are planning on creating a really in-depth analysis that tries to cover as much as possible. Such analysis has its place, but not every analysis needs to be infinitely detailed.

Remember also that all of us are often reluctant to throw out anything we've gleaned in our analysis—even if it turns out to be trivial, or unimportant. I call it *Gollum Syndrome*: gloating over "the precious".

Examples are Wonderful

A picture is worth a thousand words, and a musical example can make clear what three paragraphs of words cannot describe.

Modern technology has given us music notation programs like Sibelius and Finale, plus word processors. Every music notation program can save a music file as a graphic image, and every word processing program can place graphic images within a body of text. Any halfway-decent word processing program can automate captions for those images as well—and can create a table of contents for your images. The tools are there, and quite easy to learn and to use.

Some General Tips (from past experience with analysis papers...)

1. Decide how you are going to describe measures: are you going to write "measure 4" or "m4"? It doesn't matter — but be sure to pick something and stick to it.

2. The same holds true for keys and modes: are you going to capitalize "Major" and "Minor" or leave them lowercase? What about hyphens: are you going to write "B-flat" or "B flat"? Or are you going to take the trouble to mix fonts and write "B♭"? It doesn't matter in and of itself, but you need to be consistent.

3. Another consistency issue: abbreviations. Are you going to write "No." or "#" or "N." for "number"? In general, it's probably best not to use abbreviations unless they're incredibly common — like 'Op.' But be consistent — don't write 'Op.' in one sentence and 'Opus' the next, unless you're using the words in a different context. (For example: "Following Op. 18 No. 6, the next opus number to represent string quartets is Op. 59.")

4. Endowing musical instruments with consciousness is program-note style. "Suddenly, the first violin remembers that it forgot to state the main theme, which it does now in a hurried, almost crabbed fashion." It's cute, but inappropriate in analytical writing.

5. In general it's best to avoid attempting a Vulcan mind-meld with the composer. "Beethoven could express his anguish and grief only by the triple *fortissimo* at this point..."

6. Words in foreign languages are written in italics. That includes most of the everyday musical terminology — *allegro, forte, pianissimo, crescendo* and the like. However, it doesn't include terms like symphony, concerto, movement, or the rest, that are part of everyday English usage.

7. Include measure numbers liberally and lavishly. Always use a measure number when you refer to something. Try to avoid phrases like "six measures later..." or, at the very least, qualify this with "six measures later, at measure 24...".

8. If you include a musical example, there should be a reason for its being there. In other words, you should reference it in your text. Don't just include it because you made it and can't stand the thought of leaving it out. (See *Gollum Syndrome.*)

9. Bibliography: an absolute *must*. However, a bibliography should contain listing of sources

which you've actually consulted and used in your paper. It should not be a list of books and articles that you copied from a Grove's article and never used. The main reason a bibliography is critical is that you just might present outdated or questionable information from a particular source, and your reader needs to be able to know that it isn't necessarily your mistake.[1]

10. Citations and formatting: when you cite a block of text (more than one sentence), format it in a slightly smaller size of the same font as your main text, and indent it by ½ inch in both left and right margins, like so:

> This is an example of a citation done properly. Both the left and right margins are indented, so that the block of text is clearly separated from the rest of the text. Some writers prefer to use full justification for text blocks — that's entirely up to you. Personally I rather like the full justification, so I use it. But left justification (resulting in a jagged right margin) is common, and quite acceptable as well.

11. More on citations and formatting: if you cite a single sentence, or a phrase, then it's best to enclose it in double quotation marks and leave it in the main body of your text. For example: "...when making an Apple Brown Betty, we recommend that you core and seed the apples, or else your dinner guests may complain that the dessert was overly crunchy."[2]

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[1] Say, for example, that you give the date of Haydn's Symphony No. 1 as 1759, which was long the accepted year—especially because Haydn himself thought that was the year he wrote it. Subsequent research, however, has proven that it's more like 1757, given that copies have surfaced that were made in 1758. That's fairly recent research, though, and even first-rate sources like the Geiringer biography of Haydn will give 1759 as the date of his first symphony. Another classic example is the accepted date of Bach's *Der Kunst der Fuge*, which until very recently was thought to date from Bach's last year — but newer research puts it almost a decade earlier!

[2] And of course you remember to cite your source in a footnote at this point: *Stewart, Martha:* Martha's Excruciatingly Perfect Guide to Entertaining in the Slammer (New York: Perfect Publications, 2004)