

How to Write a Music Review

"Five Tips for a Successful Music Review"

by Vince Corozine (ASCAP)

1. Who Should Write a Review?

Writing an informative and captivating music review can be a challenging task. It is helpful if the reviewer is a musician and understands music theory, musical styles, and the type of music to be reviewed. It is essential for the reviewer to be aware of the target audience for which the music review is intended. My reviews are targeted to music teachers who have an in-depth understanding and appreciation of music.

2. What Does the Reader Want to Know?

The reader of my column is educated, has an in-depth understanding of music, including music theory, conducting, and music pedagogy, and a level of musical understanding in all genres of music.

Typical readers want to know about the product. They are looking for new ideas for presenting music in concerts and on the football field. They want music that will add diversity to their concert programming.

Readers want to know certain things about each piece of music; specifically the level of difficulty, and any unusual demands placed on the different instruments and the appropriateness of the music for performance.

Here is an example taken from one of my recent music reviews:

Here we have ten minutes of Spanish flavored music that has many dynamic types of shading, and is sprinkled with sustained lines, weaving counter lines, and thick, resonant chords. The contrasts in mood are very well handled. It is a rousing number that exudes rhythmic intensity, and Spanish bravado. This exciting musical composition brings out a sense of adventure, and student will enjoy the brisk tempo and fiery Spanish rhythms.

Another review contains a subtle warning to the reader:

This is a challenging piece in that the flutes must be proficient at rapid tonguing and the high tessitura of the trumpets and horns can be demanding. The snare drum solos are effective and provide smooth linkages between sections. However, the dynamics must be carefully observed to make these transitions effective. A proficient xylophone player is necessary in this piece.

The title of the piece, the composer/arranger, and name of the music publisher should be at the top of the review.

3. What About the Style of Writing?

It is best to avoid using terms such as: "you" "your" and "I" in the review. It is assumed that whatever is written is the expressed opinion of the reviewer and if not, then that statement should be quotations.

It is also helpful if the reviewer avoids the use of clichés, and generic, non-specific terms such as "interesting," and accumulates a list of colorful adjectives that can be used to describe the music. The words "appealing" "fascinating" and "exciting" are more suitable than the word, "interesting." The following are a few helpful descriptive terms for use in music reviews:

freshness of sound, absence of musical clichés, colorful work, use of sonorous pedal-points, the crisp and intense combination of....., splashes of percussive color, a deep woody bassoon solo..., leads to a warm, mellow four-part horn chorale, a tender, expressive melody by the oboe.

Here is another example from one of my recent music reviews:

This piece is a tender expression and an excellent composition for teaching dynamics, balance of tone, and phrasing. The contrast in scoring makes this piece a first-rate choice for programming.

4. How to Approach Writing a Music Review

It is essential that the reviewer consider the type of review that is expected by the publisher. For example does the publisher want an in-depth analysis of one

or two compositions or does he/she expect an overview of seven or eight selections?

The reviewer should listen to each selection many times in order to grasp and absorb the many layers of sound and to acquire a deeper understanding of the music. Taking detailed notes about what stands out in the music can be very helpful. Writing a music review is a creative process that is based on the individual opinion and personal tastes of the reviewer. The reviewer must be able to recommend appropriate and usable musical compositions to the reader.

The music reviewer is not a specialist in all styles and genres of music. For example, a band director may not feel comfortable or confident reviewing music for chamber groups or orchestra. In this case it may be wise to ask an expert in a particular field (strings) to write the review for a particular column. Perhaps the reviewer can offer one review and the guest reviewer can review six or seven other pieces. This assists the reviewer and provides positive visibility and exposure for the guest reviewer, and guarantees that the reader will gain maximum benefit from the reviews.

It is of vital importance to stress the positive aspects of the music that is being reviewed. It is a wise policy to select for review only pieces that the reviewer can recommend to the readers. Often what is said in the review can be a very subtle warning to the reader such as:

A total of seven percussion players are required and the sound emanating from the percussion section must be carefully balanced so they do not overpower the winds

If a teacher has only two percussionists in his ensemble, I doubt that he/she would consider playing this piece.

If a review states that the *tessitura* (range) of the trumpets is high throughout the piece, this will alert the music teacher to select this piece only if he has a very strong trumpet section.

Stating that the bassoon has a lengthy solo, without stating which instrument it is cued for is of little help to the reader. It should be stated that the bassoon solo

is cued for the tenor sax or the baritone horn. Most bands have one or no bassoons and another instrument must cover that instrument in its absence.

Here is another example taken from a recent review:

Sharp, precise tonguing is needed to make this march sparkle, and close attention must be paid to the dynamic contrasts between mf and ff, and ff to pp. The woodwinds must be capable of playing diatonic and chromatic scales at a bright all- breve tempo.

Music is a very personal experience and the writer's subjective judgment can be very helpful for the reader. But each opinion rendered needs a framework of support. The writer must bring meaning through explanations regarding his/her opinions. Written comments should be backed up with musical facts and a sense of musical understanding.

5. Where Do I Find Music to Review?

Begin by compiling a list of the major music publishers who publish the type of music that you will be reviewing. Contact with them by phone or by e-mail and ask for sample scores and CDs. Today most of the printed music is available to listeners online--just type the name of the composition and its composer/arranger and locate it at the publisher, at a musical outlet or on YouTube. Some of the music publishers will send scores via Pdf files for review. It is to be emphasized that there are many small music publishing companies that are producing some very high-quality material for schools and will leap at the chance to have their music reviewed.

It is helpful to ask experienced and successful music teachers to recommend pieces that they and their students love to play.

Final Points

- Use a catchy or descriptive title to captivate the attention of the reader and unify the review.

Here are a few "catchy" titles that were suggested from my musician friends:

Keeping Score, What's the Score?, Vince's Views, Variations by Vince, Vince's Verdict, Mr. Note It All, Excerpt Expert, Instrumental Corner, Music Mavin, Note Value, Overtones, Full Score, and Senza Sordino.

- Avoid using slang or colloquial expressions such as:.

Man, that was a groovy piece of music! "Awesome to say the least!" "One can really chill out listening to this piece"

- Ask a local editor to peruse and edit the review before submitting it.
- Read many reviews to obtain a sense of style and content.
- Learn about writing and how to improve the presentation.
- Send a thank you note (or email) to the person or persons who provided the music for the reviews, along with a copy of the review.

Another posting from a recent review:

This dramatic piece creates an intense, rhythmic, driving, angular sound that is quite contemporary;. The rich and resonant brass and the crisp and exact percussion dominate the scene throughout, as the main theme is somewhat developed. This composition would make a good concert opener.

The best way to learn to write music reviews is to study what is currently being written for various music magazines, in print and online. Analyze, circle the adjectives, note the positive comments, sense the style of the writer, and *Just Write It!*

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Music reviewer for School Band and Orchestra Magazine and banddirector.com. Arranger/Composer/Conductor/Clinician: College Professor of Music. Private study with Arnold Franchetti (Hartt School), Bernard Wagenaar (Julliard School), Jimmy Giuffre (NYC). Author of "Arranging Music for the Real World" publisher

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