Analysing the content of concert program notes written by students, composers and professional writers for contemporary classical music

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BACKGROUND

The program note has been a common feature of live classical music concerts for 200 years.

This study followed two recent studies:
1. Listener reactions to program notes by professional writers, with works in the classical canon (Margulis, 2010);

2. Program notes by composers (Blom, Bennett, Stevenson, 2016).

To date, no studies have focused on program notes written by higher education students.

THE DATA

30 program notes written for contemporary classical music:

10 written by university students
10 written by the composer of each work
10 written by professional program note writers

All within the Australian context – Australian music, Australian writers

Table 1: Analytical themes/framework

Ferrara	Nattiez	Margulis	Focus
Syntactical	Neutral	Structural	Sound, musical structures, features, form
Semantic	Esthesic	Dramatic	Possible references, meanings, interpretation
Ontological	Poietic	N/A	Relation to life-world or production creation
Syntactical-Semantic	Neutral-Esthesic	Structural-Dramatic	Essentially syntactical leading to semantic assertions
Semantic-Syntactical	Esthesic-Neutral	Dramatic - Structural	Essentially semantic supported by syntactical evidence

AIM

We had two aims: to

1. Design an analytical frame for analysing program notes; and

2. Trial the analytical frame on the content of concert program notes written by composers, professional program note writers and higher education students.

APPROACH

Program notes were viewed as texts, drawing on Stanley's (2016) work in which she viewed letters as:

- documents of life; program notes viewed as texts;

- the product of interpretation and claim in musical life: produced for a purpose, and as accounts.

The analytical frame was developed and applied to content, intent, 1st or 3rd person and word count to determine emphasis of information type.
Individual analysis was followed by dual analysis and discussion until consensus was reached.
Inter-coder reliability reached the cut-off of 0.8

ANALYSING INTENT

The program notes had three main intentions:

1. **To guide or direct the listener**
   Not limiting listeners' own interpretations, inspiring listeners to become absorbed;

2. **To shape the performer's interpretation**
   To clarify the aesthetic approach and inspire imaginative play;

3. **As a collaborative tool between composer, performer and listener**
   To share larger artistic concerns;
   To generate dialogue between performer, listener and composer;
   To give confidence to listeners

Table 2: Results of program note analysis (counts)

1st	3rd	Word count average	Content	Intent
		Student		
6	4	172	Influences (7) Personal challenge (1) Theoretical frame (1) Compositional thinking (1)	Guide, direct the listener (8) Collaborative tool (2) And 2 notes used both.
		Composer		
3	7	105	Historical (2) Context / background(6) Draw listeners in (1) Direct listeners (1)	History (1) Context (3) Context/instruments (1) Guide the listener (5)
		Prof writer		
2	8	302	Contextual (5) Descriptive (5) Historical (2) Interpretative (7)	Guide, direct the listener (10). 4 of these also encouraging interpretation; 1 providing historical context; 1 linking work to its presentation within the venue

CONCLUSIONS

Semantic information fits with composers' writing about their own work;

Syntactical information allows the professional writer to analyse aspects of the work;

Personal information is used by student writers, especially those performing a work. It offers a very frank and personal view of the composition or their performing concerns;

All three groups use *ontological information*;

Composers and professional writers are able to combine content styles in one section/sentence, whilst students use a narrower range of content types in their program notes.

The range of content types (and word count) increases with professional program note writers.

CONCLUSIONS (continued)

The three groups of writers adopt different content styles for their program notes, each bringing a different perspective to program note writing.

Program note writing is an authentic assessment task for performance and composition students. It

1. engages their professionally-oriented writing skills; and

2. requires deep thinking about the repertoire and its preparation/ composition.

We recommend that students be encouraged to write program notes which engage the audience through the use of all content categories: conceptual and structural + contextual/historical + personal + metaphorical + interpretative information.

The skill of writing a program note can be taught and learned, but the templates used by higher education institutions are rarely informed by the literature and may give students incorrect advice.

The analytical frame worked well, especially when combined meanings were adopted: for example, semantic-syntactical. We would like to simplify the wording, however, adopting terms which are easier to understand by a broader section of potential program note writers. We are currently working on this.

References
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