

Art of Production (Programming)

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A Pinch of This and A Pinch of That

Do you remember the last time you had a great meal—totally ruined by one entrée? Or how about that exciting football game—blown into oblivion by the 95-yard run-back that caused your team to lose? What about that fabulous trip—when the bus kept breaking down?

When it comes to concert programming there are significant parallels. One composition improperly positioned in the program order can ruin the feeling of satisfaction we get from that concert (audience and band members alike). Sometimes the music doesn't lift us up or let us down in the right way. Sometimes the band is not prepared to perform one of the pieces. Other times the program contains far too many of the same kinds of compositions. And often it is because the physical aspects of concert programming are badly handled and don't provide a good platform for an otherwise well laid-out program.

The best analogy, in my mind, is one related to cooking: A great cook knows just how much of each ingredient—each seasoning—must be used to prepare a great meal. The problem is, it is not all that simple to just jot down the exact combinations so that one of us could duplicate that great meal. When asked how a certain dish is made, the chef would probably say, "With a pinch of this and a pinch of that."

Chances are, that chef (director) would even give you the recipe (program order). We might follow the description, seemingly to the letter, and end up with a very ordinary meal (concert).

So, over the past few years I've made it a point to observe the little things that make concerts special. These include such things as program order, program mix, physical considerations, and gimmicks. Here are a few pinches of this and that that might help you improve programming:

* Think about including a composition that will give your concert a uniquely exciting opening and/or closing. By always ending the concert with a march, for example, the audience may feel completely let-down if it follows a very exciting piece. In a concert-in-park atmosphere, two or three marches at the end may stand the audience on its ear.

* Think about the concert mix—before you start the rehearsal process. A program of all contemporary music, all war horse transcriptions, all marches, or all stylistically similar compositions is almost always deadly.

* Think about concert order. Even though you may have selected a great opener and the perfect finale, it is important to be aware of audience concentration. If you program two ten-minute overture-like pieces in succession, you'll lose your audience about half way into the second piece. The same would be true if you play a chorale-style composition immediately after a heavy overture.

* Think about variety within the program. Feature a soloist, a guest conductor, a narrator. Do something visually interesting with film, slides, or costumed vocalists.

* Think about timing. How many long and how many short pieces are programmed? Will the pace of the program drag or will it seem frantic and fragmented?

* Think about program length. There are very few groups good enough to sustain interest for more than a hour. If you have more than one group on the concert, keep the total length (including staging) to one hour and thirty minutes. Unless you have a very high-powered program, do not include an intermission.

* Think about staging. Is the band seated before the audience arrives or do you warm up the group in front of the audience? If so, stop doing that. It lacks class and is definitely unprofessional.

* Think about special entrances or exits. Have the band enter the stage area while playing, or use a "Farewell Symphony" exit. Try using antiphonal sections or soloists.

* Think about singing. Have the band sing with or without accompaniment. Try putting the band in with the audience to sing the National Anthem at the beginning or Silent Night at the end. (Thanks, Dad, for one of the best ideas of all time!)

* Think about lighting. Can you bring down or bring up certain lights at concert time? It affects the feel of the program.

* Think about attire. Does the group look professional? Is the attire a mish-mash of who-knows-what? Does one person in an otherwise uniform ensemble have on the wrong color shoes, socks, coat, tie? Make positive changes; they have a dramatic impact on how your program comes across.

Next time: Real-world examples, including possible compositions for band of all ages, program order considerations, and special ways to accent a concert.

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