Program Notes

Every student who undertakes a performance-based SIP in the Music Department must complete a detailed program for their performance, to be submitted at the time of the SIP hearing (i.e., a minimum of three weeks prior to your intended presentation time.)

Good program notes prepare your audience for the performance to come, priming them to listen well and enhancing their experience of the music. As both note-writer and performer, your goal is not simply to inform, but to guide your listeners towards the experience of the music closest to the ideal that you have in mind as an artist. Your tools to achieve this include various categories of information, some of which must be included in any program note, and some of which should be selected judiciously to guide your audience.

Your program note must include:

i. Titles of composition
   - Including: key, opus number, Köchel number, etc. if appropriate
   - Title of movements if applicable

ii. Names of composers (or the relevant musical traditions if composer is unknown)
   - Birth and death dates if applicable

iii. Name(s) of your accompanist(s) and/or those assisting you.

iv. Your bio.

For each piece, you should also include some combination (though not necessarily all) of the following:

- Relevant biographical and historical facts about the creator(s) of a work.
- Historical and cultural context of a work’s performance or reception.
- Relationship between a specific work and a genre/style/period.
- Significant or notable musical elements to listen for in the music.
- The interpretive choices required of the performers.
- Your own personal relationship with and understanding of the music.
- Information about your arrangement of the piece.

Remember your goal is not simply to provide facts about a given piece. Instead you want to use a combination of historical background, musical guidance, and your own individual understanding of the piece to prepare the listener to receive your specific artistic vision of the performance.

Peruse the following examples of well-conceived program notes:

Michael Steinberg
http://msomn.org/mahler-2-note-by-michael-steinberg/

Zaide Pixley (K College Professor Emerita)

1 In regards to the above examples, keep in mind that this length of note is neither expected nor required. The program note by Michael Steinberg for example is preparing an audience to hear a 90-minute work.
A Note on Citations:

“The writer of notes to be read before a concert performs a different function than the critic or the writer of review after a concert, of course. He draws prudently on musicology and cautiously on criticism.”
(Kerman, “The Art of the Program Note” in Opera and the Morbidity of Music)

As you can see from the examples linked above, program notes do not typically include formal citations indicating the sources used; program notes follow a different set of genre conventions than research papers, and to different ends. However, as with all writing you do, fundamental standards of plagiarism and attribution still apply. This means that when you quote someone else’s words directly, you must place them in quotation marks and give a parenthetical attribution (as above.)

While you aren’t writing a term paper, the committee of faculty who sits for your recital hearing will expect you to follow good scholarly practice in researching the pieces/composers/genres that you plan to perform. This means using information that is attributable to reputable sources.

During your SIP hearing, the committee will ask you about the sources you referenced for your program notes, and you should have good answers ready.

Standard first stops for research will include:
- Oxford Music Online (esp. the Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians)
- Grove Research Guides
- RILM (Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale) Abstracts in Music Literature
- Garland Encyclopedia of World Music
- British Library World & Traditional Music Collection
- Open Music Library
- Smithsonian Global Sound

Online sources like Wikipedia can sometimes be useful places to begin your research, but should only serve as a starting point. While you should not rely directly on information from a Wikipedia page, you may often use that page to find the original source of information cited in the article. Then you assess that source’s reliability, and if you deem it trustworthy on the topic, use the relevant information in your program note.

If you have any questions about where to find appropriate information, feel free to contact Dr. Bothwell, in addition to consulting with your professor of applied performance.