

HOW TO WRITE ABOUT MUSIC:

In writing about music, it's important to use certain terms correctly, with regard to what they mean and the form in which they are written.

Some Basic Performance Vocabulary Here are a few terms you'll need to use in discussing musical performances, some of these are misused surprisingly often

Composition, piece, and work These may all be used, more or less interchangeably, for a single, complete piece of music ("The first composition on the program was very short", "The second piece was the one I enjoyed most", "This is a contemporary work")

Song This is a relatively brief work for a solo singer, which is not part of a larger work like an opera or an oratorio (though it may be part of a song cycle, and the term is also correct for a solo passage in a musical comedy or operetta). Note that *song* should *not* be used for an instrumental work, or for an aria.

Aria This is a passage for a solo singer in an opera or oratorio. If it is being performed out of context, as part of a concert or recital, it is still referred to as an *aria*. Some arias are independent compositions; these are called *concert arias*.

Vocal, vocalist. *Vocal* means *of the voice*; it is redundant and therefore incorrect to speak of a "vocal song." *Vocalist* is simply a synonym for *singer*.

Choral, chorus. *Choral* means *of a choir* (thus a *choral work* is a work for choir), and a *chorus* is a relatively large choir, or group of singers.

Ensemble. This can refer to any group of performers, but it is most commonly used for smaller groups (A large group would be referred to as, say, an *orchestra*, *chorus*, or *band*.)

Chamber music. This refers to any music written for a chamber ensemble—a string quartet, a piano trio, a chamber orchestra, and so on. (Music for a soloist, or for a soloist with accompanist, may or may not be chamber music.)

Symphony. This is a composition for orchestra, usually in four movements. The term should *not* be used as a short form of "symphony orchestra" (the term to use in that case is *orchestra*.)

Program. A word with several meanings: (1) An entire concert or recital ("I enjoyed tonight's program"). (2) The printed booklet given to audience members at a concert, opera, recital, etc. ("I found that reading the program notes helped me understand the music"). (3) A literary text, a place, an event, or the like, on which a musical composition is based ("Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* has an autobiographical program").

Performance. This term typically refers to the actual act of making music ("a virtuoso performance"), though it is sometimes used to mean a musical presentation ("The performance consisted of six works").

Concert, recital. A recital is a program by a soloist or by two performers (soloist and accompanist, or a duo). A *concert* is a program by a chamber ensemble, orchestra, band, or chorus; there are also rock, jazz, and pop concerts.

Production. This is a performance of a work that involves staging—costumes, scenery, etc.—as well as music. The term may also refer to the costumes, scenery, and so on, as distinct from the music ("The opera was well sung, but the production seemed overelaborate").

Show. This term is properly used only for popular music and musical comedy.