

The Role of Program Notes in Nonmusicians' Enjoyment of Choral Music

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Background

Performing musicians have a vested interest in understanding factors that can influence concertgoers' enjoyment of live music, particularly when those in attendance have no extensive music training, no developed preference for the genre of music being performed, and are listening to music that is unfamiliar. The more information musicians have about factors that may increase listening enjoyment for nonmusicians, the better able they may be to deliberately enhance the concert experience.

Psychologists and musicians have long studied variables that affect listeners' responses to unfamiliar music and have described both musical and extra-musical factors that contribute to enjoyment. Regarding repertoire, we know that compositional elements of music typically affect listeners' enjoyment (for a review, see Teo, 2003). Listeners tend to like melodies that follow scalar patterns, are predictable, and employ repetition that generates a measure of familiarity in the moment. Open and consonant harmonies (e.g., 4ths, 5ths, and octaves) are enjoyed more than dissonant ones (e.g., 2nds, 6ths, and 7ths), and listeners tend to like upbeat music that maintains tempo and incorporates steady rhythms. Taken together, Teo's data suggest that listeners tend to like relatively simple music more than complex combinations of compositional elements. Teo's review also states that the typical listener prefers instrumental over vocal music (with the exception of popular songs). Although this review did not address the influence of song lyrics or the text of classical choral pieces on listeners' responses, the idea that lyrics and text may play a role in the enjoyment of these genres of music is worthy of investigation.

In fact, Fine and Ginsborg (2014) surveyed musicians and amateurs who were avid choral

music listeners as to their perceptions of sung text intelligibility, albeit in a method that did not include active music listening. Their analysis emphasized the importance that people place on their ability to understand sung text, which is an unsurprising finding that certainly has implications for audiences' enjoyment of vocal and choral performances. And, of course, in a live concert setting, audiences hear programmed music a single time, which may not always allow listeners to fully process the sung text in the moment.

Extra-musical variables that influence the extent to which listeners enjoy unfamiliar music are more individual in nature. Some of these individual variables develop over substantial periods of time and through experience, such as regular music listening habits, preferences for specific genres of music, and personal background (Hunter, Schellenberg, & Stalinski, 2011; Thompson, 2007), whereas other variables develop situationally (e.g., a moment in time, a particular setting). Thompson specifically identified 22 variables that concertgoers perceived as affecting their enjoyment of a live classical music performance, separating the data into pre- and during-performance categories. Immediately prior to the concert, audience members reported that their enjoyment of the live event would likely be influenced by their current mood, the extent to which they were looking forward to the performance, whether or not they had previously enjoyed the genre of music on the program, and preconceived notions they held about the artist or ensemble performing. When participants were surveyed again at the conclusion of the concert, they reported that the length of the concert, distractions experienced during the performance, and compositional aspects of the pieces on the program had influenced their enjoyment during the performance.

Many attendees of live classical music concerts are experiencing programmed music for the first time and some are unfamiliar with the performance genre itself, particularly if their backgrounds do not include formal music training. Because listeners are less likely to enjoy music they are hearing for the first time (Hargreaves, 1984), it could be beneficial for performing musicians to maximize all other factors within their control that may enhance their audience's experience. By programming effectively and providing supplementary information

about the pieces being performed in program notes, they may facilitate more positive responses from the audience.

Although program notes are commonly included in concert programs created for formal music performances, relatively few studies have examined whether providing listeners with these detailed notes affects their enjoyment of unfamiliar music, and the results of this work are somewhat unclear and inconsistent (Gillis, 1995; Margulis 2010; Margulis, Kisida, & Greene, 2015; Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2015). Inconsistencies among these studies may be related to differences in the content of program notes provided, in participant populations, or in the genre of music presented.

Research shows that different types of program notes are effective in increasing adult listeners' ratings of enjoyment. Gillis (1995) observed that providing an adult audience with spoken information (historical context, biographical information about the composer, compositional features) prior to the performance of contemporary art music for saxophone increased both enjoyment ratings and attentive listening behaviors as compared to the ratings and behavior of people who did not hear the information. Likewise, program notes created intentionally to facilitate a specific emotional response (i.e., a composed narrative) from adult listeners can also increase both listening enjoyment ratings and focused listening behaviors in a classical music setting (Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2015).

In contrast to the other studies of adult listeners described above, there is some evidence to suggest that program notes do not always increase listening enjoyment. Margulis (2010) observed that listeners rated their enjoyment of Beethoven string quartet excerpts higher when they were provided with no written description than when they were asked to read program notes that provided either dramatic or structural information. Margulis's protocol required participants to read the written notes twice and answer a question related to their comprehension of the information; the reading repetition and comprehension check may have played a role in the reduction of enjoyment ratings as compared to listening only. Zalanowski (1986) also observed lower ratings of enjoyment for unfamiliar instrumental classical music by a

group of adults provided with a related written story as compared with a group instructed to use their own imagery while listening. It is important to note that in both of these studies, the information provided in program notes did not provide historical or compositional context for the music.

The extent to which program notes can affect the listening experience of people in different age groups remains largely unexplored. In one study that examined children's responses to an educationally-focused folk music concert, Margulis et al. (2015) found that the group of children who read program notes reported paying more attention and demonstrated better comprehension of the presented information than did the other group. Although there were no differences between groups in terms of their ratings of enjoyment, the authors noted that a small subset of the children who read program notes rated their enjoyment of the concert significantly higher than did the other members of the same group. Citing common demographic data, the authors speculated that this subset of students were likely experiencing a live formal performance for the first time; in this unfamiliar setting, reading program notes increased their ratings of enjoyment.

This body of research makes clear that the effect of program notes on listeners' enjoyment of unfamiliar music depends on context, which raises new questions that have yet to be examined. Two such questions guided the current study. First, the extent to which reading the accompanying composed text for each piece prior to listening may affect nonmusicians' enjoyment of unfamiliar classical choral music remains unknown. Based on our understanding of the importance of sung text intelligibility, it is reasonable to question whether providing this information in program notes may play a role in audience response. Second, the studies described above suggest that variables of compositional complexity and listener familiarity (see Margulis, 2010; Margulis et al., 2015; Teo, 2003; Thompson, 2007) may influence the extent to which enjoyment may be influenced by program notes. The purpose of this study was to determine whether program notes that include the text of unfamiliar choral pieces would affect nonmusicians' listening enjoyment, and to determine whether such effects would vary

depending on the compositional complexity of the music heard.

Method

Eighteen participants ($N=269$, male=62, 2 abstained) were undergraduate students between the ages of 18-35 ($M=20.22$, 61 abstained) enrolled in nine sections of music classes for non-music majors at Texas State University (e.g., general music methods for elementary education majors). Participants voluntarily completed a survey distributed during a regular class meeting that required them to read program notes, listen to a prepared recording of three choral works, and rate how much they enjoyed listening to the music.

The pieces selected were mixed-voice choral works that vary in terms of compositional complexity (see Appendix A). Excerpts were taken from published recordings made by one collegiate-level and two professional-level ensembles. Piece 1¹ was “Requiem” by Craig Hella Johnson. This piece has open, chordal harmonies, slow rhythmic gestures, and a slow tempo. The melody line is predominately stepwise and is performed in a legato style with a warm timbre. Piece 2² was “Nelly Bly” by Stephen Foster, which is mostly homophonic with noticeable sections of repetition and simple harmony. The tempo is upbeat with quick rhythmic gestures, and the folk-style melody features a combination of large leaps and stepwise motion. Piece 3³ was “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners” by Willimetta Spencer. This piece has thick texture that varies substantially (homophonic, polyphonic, and monophonic), the harmonic language changes frequently, and the melodies are often disjunct. Rhythms vary between quick fanfare-like gestures and slow legato lines, and the overall timbre is quite dark. Each recording was edited slightly to control for length while maintaining musical integrity (i.e., excerpts would begin and end in musically appropriate places) so that participants heard approximately two minutes of each composition.

Three program note conditions were designed so that the extent of information provided for each of the three works varied (see Appendix A). All participants were presented with basic

¹ From *A Company of Voices: Conspirare in Concert*, recorded by Conspirare

² From *Home on the Range*, recorded by The University of Utah Singers

³ From *Fern Hill: American Choral Music*, Corigliano-Belmont-Barber, recorded by Kansas City Chorale

program information, including title, composer, and author of the text. The Control condition included no additional information, the Text condition included the composed text, and the Text+Notes condition included both the text and brief notes that provided context for the three pieces (e.g., why the piece was written, notable musical features). Nine recordings were prepared in a partially counterbalanced design to control for order effects related to the presentation of the pieces and conditions; in other words, the order in which pieces were played for each of the nine classes varied, and all participants heard each piece only one time. Likewise, every participant experienced all three program note conditions only one time, such that three pieces paired with three program note conditions yielded nine unique piece x program note condition orders. Nine survey packets were assembled based on the requirements of this design. Before beginning, participants heard the following instructions:

Thank you for your participation in today's research study. You will listen to three choir performances and will rate your enjoyment of each piece you hear. Please answer honestly when responding to all questions. You have been provided with a packet that contains information about the three pieces you will listen to. You will also hear some introductory material before each performance begins.

In order to ensure the likelihood that participants attended to the information provided to them in their survey packet, a recording of a male voice reading the program notes preceded each piece (Gillis, 1995); participants were invited to read along with the recording. At the conclusion of each work, participants were given ample time to rate their enjoyment of the pieces on a scale from 1 to 20 (Prompt: "I enjoyed listening to this piece" with anchors "Strongly disagree" at 1 and "Strongly agree" at 20). After rating all three pieces, participants were asked to provide their age, gender, and information about their prior music experiences.

Results

Demographic data related to prior music experiences revealed that 190 participants (70.63%) had participated in a music ensemble (instrumental or choral) at some point in their life, and 134

of them (49.81%) had taken private music lessons as well. 172 participants (63.94%) had attended at least one choral concert within the previous 12 years (years since attending a choral concert, $M = 3.00$).

In order to determine whether program notes affected nonmusicians' enjoyment of unfamiliar choral music, we collapsed the data to yield an overall mean enjoyment rating for each program note condition (see Table 1). This decision was made because the partially counterbalanced design controlled for potential order effects for both piece and program note condition and to reduce the likelihood for Type I error by conducting one analysis rather than three. We compared the mean enjoyment ratings associated with the three program note conditions using a One-way Repeated Measures ANOVA. Results indicate that there were no significant differences between overall mean enjoyment ratings for the three presentation conditions, $F(2, 536) = 1.82, p = .163$.

Table 1. Mean enjoyment ratings.

	Control		Text		Text+Notes	
	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Piece 1	15.08	(3.55)	14.21	(3.78)	15.41	(2.96)
Piece 2	13.72	(3.54)	13.83	(3.65)	13.86	(3.39)
Piece 3	11.57	(4.30)	12.50	(4.44)	12.95	(4.01)

Note. All three groups were provided with title, composer, and text author. Piece 1: "Requiem" by Johnson/Gilkyson, Piece 2: "Nelly Bly" by Foster, Piece 3: "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners" by Spencer/Donne.

Although mean enjoyment ratings for all three pieces were generally positive (mean range: 11.57-15.41 on a 20-point scale), there was a noticeable difference in mean enjoyment ratings between pieces regardless of presentation condition. In other words, mean ratings were highest for Piece 1, "Requiem" by Craig Hella Johnson, and lowest for Piece 3, "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners" by Willimetta Spencer. Although differences between mean enjoyment ratings for the

program note conditions were not significant, the highest mean enjoyment ratings were associated with the Text+Notes condition; this tendency was most notable for Pieces 1 and 3, both of which are more compositionally complex than Piece 2.

Discussion

These data suggest that providing program notes containing composed text may have no discernable effect on the extent to which nonmusicians enjoy listening to unfamiliar choral music. It is important to note that mean enjoyment ratings for the three pieces heard were generally positive which could indicate that the aesthetic value and psychological benefit of listening to recorded choral music may be more salient to nonmusicians than the presence of detailed program notes, a result consistent with points articulated by Margulis (2010). On the other hand, our data do not suggest that program notes detracted from listeners' enjoyment, as have other studies involving adults (Margulis, 2010; Zalanowski, 1986).

Though the differences in enjoyment ratings were not statistically significant, there is an interesting trend related to the pairings of the three program note conditions and the three pieces that differed in terms of compositional complexity. The first piece, "Requiem" includes many compositional characteristics identified by Teo (2003) as those most likely to be enjoyable to an average listener (e.g., stepwise melody, open harmonic structure, predictable tempo and rhythms). This could mean that for songs that are accessible to nonmusicians in terms of complexity, reading additional information may not enhance listeners' enjoyment compared with listening alone. The second piece, "Nelly Bly" can be described as simple and repetitive, and the program note conditions did nothing to enhance listeners' enjoyment. In fact, mean ratings between the program note conditions were the most similar for "Nelly Bly." The third piece, "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners," is a more compositionally complex piece relative to the other two pieces, containing rhythms, tempos, timbres, textures, harmonies, and dynamics that varied widely. There were more marked differences in mean enjoyment ratings for this piece between program note conditions; in other words, the more extensive program notes became,

the higher participants tended to rate their enjoyment of the piece, albeit at a nonsignificant level.

One limitation of this study is that our data are based on listeners' responses to recorded choral performances rather than live performances. Were these nonmusicians able to attend a live concert instead, results may have been different, as Thompson's 2007 study suggests. In our study, listeners were not given the opportunity to experience a formal concert venue or to make an emotional connection with singers on a stage. Future studies in the area of choral music and listening enjoyment could include implementing these program note conditions in a live performance setting, then surveying concert attendees immediately following the event.

Another line of continued investigation on this topic should include a more focused exploration of the possibility that program notes may influence nonmusicians' enjoyment differently depending on the complexity of the music. Although our data suggest that the aesthetic experience of music listening may be the *most* salient factor contributing to enjoyment, they also hint at the existence of a relationship between these variables that invites future investigation.

Program notes are commonly included in programs for formal classical music concerts, presumably to enhance the concert experience for those in attendance. For choral ensembles in particular, providing composed text in program notes may increase text intelligibility in the moment for some listeners, and for pieces that are complex in nature, providing context for the music may increase listeners' enjoyment. Developing a strategic understanding of the kind of information program notes should provide in order to optimize the audience's experience seems advantageous for those organizing such materials for performing ensembles.

Keywords

music listening, program notes, choral music, text

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Appendix A: Program Notes

Piece 1: “Requiem”; Music by Craig Hella Johnson; Text by Eliza Gilkyson

Piece 1 text:

Mary, fill the glass to overflowing,
 Illuminate the path where we are going,
 Have mercy on us all.
 In funeral fires burning
 Each flame to your mystery, returning.
 In the dark night of the soul
 Your shattered dreamers, make them whole,
 Oh Mother Mary, find us where we've fallen out of grace,
 Lead us to a higher place.
 In the dark night of the soul
 Our broken hearts you can make whole,
 Oh Mother Mary, come and carry us in your embrace,
 Let us see your gentle face, Mary.

Piece 1 notes:

Dr. Craig Hella Johnson, director of Conspirare in Austin, Texas, arranged Requiem, a piece originally written and sung by Eliza Gilkyson to commemorate the large tsunami in Asia in 2004. His simple chorale-style arrangement utilizes open chords with a flowing piano accompaniment to emphasize the plea for help, guidance, and healing within this text.

Piece 2: “Nelly Bly”; Music and text by Stephen Foster

Piece 2 text:

Heigh! Ho! Nelly, Ho!
 Listen love to me
 I'll sing for you, play for you
 A dulcet melody

Nelly Bly! Nelly Bly!
 Bring the broom along,
 We'll sweep the kitchen clean, my dear,
 And have a little song.
 Poke the wood, my lady love
 And make the fire burn,
 And while I take the banjo down,
 Just give the mush a turn.

Heigh, Nelly! Ho, Nelly!
 Listen love to me
 I'll sing for you, play for you
 A dulcet melody

Nelly Bly had a voice
 Like a turtle dove
 I hear it in the meadow
 And I hear it in the grove
 Nelly Bly had a heart as warm as a cup of tea
 And bigger than the sweet potato down in Tennessee

Heigh, Nelly! Ho, Nelly!
 Listen love to me
 I'll sing for you, play for you
 A dulcet melody

Piece 2 notes:

Stephen Foster, an American composer who wrote some of the most popular folk songs, such as *Camptown Races* and *Oh! Susanna*, composed *Nelly Bly* for a group of singers in Pennsylvania in 1850. The song recounts the story of two people in love. *Nelly Bly* inspired one of the earliest female journalists to use the name as her own in the newspaper.

Piece 3: “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners”; Music by Willimetta Spencer; Text by John Donne

Piece 3 text:

At the round earth's imagined corners blow
 Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
 From death, you numberless infinities
 Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go;
 All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
 All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
 Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you, whose eyes
 Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.
 But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space;
 For, if above all these my sins abound,
 'Tis late to ask abundance of Thy grace,
 When we are there. Here on this lowly ground,
 Teach me how to repent, for that's as good
 As if Thou hadst seal'd my pardon with Thy blood.

Piece 3 notes:

Willimetta Spencer sets the text of John Donne’s description of the end of the world and judgment of mankind with intense shifts in rhythm, melody, and performing force to paint the dramatic text. The trumpet-like fanfare in the opening is quickly followed by the scattering of voices across the choir. Spencer concludes the piece with a quickly building climax sealing the fate of the world.