

How To Write A Review

(I'm not saying all the things I list here have to be in every review that anybody writes. But it wouldn't hurt to include most of them.)

Most important things:

- A review should tell a story
- A review should be written in simple, everyday language
- The point of the review isn't whether the music was good or bad. It's much more important to say what the music was like, both objectively (what went on in purely musical terms), and subjectively (what the music felt like, what it meant to you not just as a musician, but as a human being).

Specific things to address when you write a review:

1. Point of view.

Does the concert present any issues? What was your strongest impression of it? What was your opinion? Did you like it, hate it, feel indifferent to it? The review should be built around your discussion of all this. If you're not sure what you think, then that can be your point of view -- as long as you make clear why you don't have a conclusion, and how you feel about that.

2. Musical details.

You need to make at least a few comments about objective musical facts -- things about the composition or performance. These serve to illustrate and justify your point of view. Why did you form your opinion? What happened at the concert to make you feel the way you did? Or what didn't happen?

3. Evocative impressions.

Try to find a personal, even poetic way of talking about music. Instead of saying "Franco Corelli has a loud, rough voice," you might say, "He sounds like a teenager with raging hormones." Comments like this help readers without a technical knowledge of music. They also bring your point of view alive. Maybe the articulation of the string playing was remarkable, but why do we care about that?

4. Follow through on your ideas.

If you ask questions about the concert, or about issues it seems to raise, make sure you answer them, or at least find things about the concert that illustrate what you're talking about. Don't let important thoughts or opinions just hang there. Don't just state your opinion once, and spend the rest of the review describing things that happened.

5. Make sure you have an opinion!

Yes, this last point is implied in the very first item, about your point of view. But I'm repeating it, because we've all seen how unsatisfying reviews can be if the reviewer doesn't seem to have a strong opinion. What did you think about the concert? How did you feel about it? If you're not sure -- as many of you weren't when you wrote about the Julia Wolfe piece -- it's still possible to have feelings about the very fact of not being sure. Did you end up wanting to know more about whatever left you uncertain? Did you feel, in the end, that the whole problem was academic, that nothing about the music made you care? Or was your lack of a definite opinion troubling, because the music raised important issues for you? A discussion of these points can sometimes be even more interesting than a definite viewpoint.

As I've said, not all of these points have to be in every review. And -- depending on what you're writing about -- some, in a given review, will be more important than others. If you want to say a really famous pianist isn't nearly as good as his or her reputation, then it probably helps to have lots of objective data. If you want to say why a performance moved you very deeply, it helps to have evocative impressions, so we understand what your feelings were. If you're reviewing a new composition in an unfamiliar style, it probably helps to discuss ideas -- what kind of style it is, how it relates to other styles, how hard or easy the style is to listen to. Use your judgment. But if you include most of the points I've listed here, you can't go too far wrong.