

## Effective Critique of Musical Performances

Writing effective criticism of musical performances relies upon:

- Sound observation skills
- Experience in listening to music from many genres, styles and levels
- Rich vocabulary that is able to educe the emotion created and experienced between performer and audience

I suggest the following structure:

**First Paragraph:** *An overview of the concert you attended.*

Include the title, date, time and location of the performance. Also include information about the particular group or artist you are critiquing as well as general impressions of the performance. State the title and composer of the piece you are critiquing. You may like to open with a comment or description and then lead into details of the time/place/performer/piece. For example:

"There was tremendous atmosphere in Marcia Carey's rendition of Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* at the first of the BAM 3 Performance Platform concerts for Semester 1 2008." This is more interesting than merely telling us who did what when.

Describe the musical style and convention that the performance is operating within. For example:

"Steven was firmly in the singer/songwriter tradition" or

"Tammy's band had the line-up of, and played in the style of, a 1950s-60s bebop ensemble."

Go on to describe the line-up of the ensemble. The physical placement of performers in the space may be of relevance. For example:

"Very rarely do we see a bass player standing out front of a band but in this power trio configuration Pam took a prominent upstage position."

This sentence gives us details as to the line-up of the band, some details of physical placement on stage and gives us an impression of the attitude of the performer.

**Body:** *Specifics about the piece.*

Discuss your impressions of the performance of the piece using effective musical vocabulary (see list below). Include reflections that recollect the emotions you felt. How did the music and the performance make you feel? What was the audience's reaction? For example:

"You could feel the audience's excitement build as each soloist explored the details of the form".)

You must refer to past performances and/or recordings you have experienced that you deem relevant, be they by the same composer, band, or in the same genre or style. For example:

"Haydn's trumpet Sonatas really sound best in the reverberant surrounds of a concert hall where the trumpet's tone can ring out. Although our rooms at Box Hill are a little dry, the performance was vibrant and lively."

Don't forget to use appropriate citations.

The body of your critique is the place to analyse specific elements of the performance. For example:

"The commitment of the vocalist to delivering the lyric..."

"The tightness of the rhythm section..."

"The interpretive flourishes of the piano player..."

"The balance/mix of the instruments..."

### ***Final Paragraph: Summary.***

In the end, did the performance "work" for you? Make sure to separate the performance from the piece itself. Was it a great performance of a piece you didn't really care for or was it a great piece that was well performed? Was the entire experience worth while? What could you recommend to the performer for a more effective performance next time? What would you have done? Consider that criticism is most effective when it is *constructive*; that means not merely saying "I didn't like it". It means putting a performance in a larger context (i.e. in reference to the style or tradition the piece and performance comes from) and then suggesting how more fully the piece/performance could inhabit and give expression to that idiom/style/tradition. Make sure you also mention all the aspects of the performance that were successful. For example:

"Precision is one of the musical hallmarks of Steely Dan's music and today's performance displayed a tight and infectious groove which mostly reflected that precision. With more rehearsal, I felt the band could have tightened the unison accented passages at the end of each chorus."

### **Musical Vocabulary List**

You will find many other more extensive lists online, for example:

[http://www.pinoak.us/FINEARTS/DOCS/music\\_vocab.doc](http://www.pinoak.us/FINEARTS/DOCS/music_vocab.doc)

I also recommend reading any kind of critical writing from the arts for discovering effective words for describing and critiquing performances and all modes of artistic expression.

*Expression:* dynamics, pianissimo, piano, mezzo piano, mezzo forte, forte, fortissimo, crescendo, decrescendo, diminuendo, accent

*Phrasing:* legato, tenuto, staccato, marcato, slur, phrase

*Tempo:* Allegro, up-tempo, slow, accelerando, ritardando, fermata

*Structure:* introduction, head, repeat, first ending, second ending,

A section, B section (etc.), D.S., D.C., coda

*Miscellaneous:* rhythm, intonation, tone quality, scale passages (runs), bass line, melody, accompaniment, counter melody, harmony, chord progression, trills, ornaments, solo, tutti, background line, etc.

**Word Length and Layout**

Critiques must be typed, single-spaced, 12 point standard font, with 1 inch margins. Your name, class, and date must appear in the upper right hand corner of the page. Critiques should be two pages in length (minimum 1 page and maximum 2 full pages).