

Greg Sandow

How to Write a Press Release

Or at least some ideas in that direction, since I've been complaining about classical music press releases that are dumb and empty. (From my blog, originally posted in 2005, revised in April 2017.)

A few principles:

1. Classical music is full of depth and intelligence. Press releases should reflect that. Not just state it, but reflect it with intelligence of their own.
2. The classical music audience is smart. So are the people we'd like to attract to classical music, along with people in the media we wish would pay attention. Another reason why press releases have to be intelligent.
3. Classical music has competition. A press release should—at least implicitly—give its readers reasons why they should pick this concert over other forms of art or entertainment. Or, for that matter, over other classical music events.

And now some disclaimers:

1. The samples I'm about to offer aren't actual press releases. The writing might be a little rough, and I mostly haven't bothered with the who, what, where, and when. I've concentrated, instead, on what's usually left out: *why*.
2. I'll often only deal with single pieces, not with entire concert programs. Those are harder. How do all the pieces fit together? (Though I've addressed that, repeatedly, in concert blurbs I've written for orchestra brochures. I'll give some samples here.)
3. I can't promise that the approaches I'm about to take will work. I've hardly ever seen them tried. (Maybe only on the Boston Philharmonic's website, and in some St. Louis Symphony brochures I long ago worked on. If anybody knows of other examples, please tell me!)
4. There are larger issues in marketing that I don't address here, above all this: Why should anybody go to classical concerts at all? Making them seem interesting is part of the battle, but

won't work unless we first find ways to make our potential audience pay any attention at all. That's a larger question, which I hope to address later on.

And finally: The way to get the kind of information I'll offer here is, at least in theory, very simple. You ask the musicians who'll perform the concert what they had in mind. You should also ask the artistic staff of the performing group, if the group is large enough to have one.

So, to demonstrate my method, almost everything that I'm about to write is based on something a musician told me, about a performance he or she gave or was about to give. I've named some of those musicians at the end. But the way that I express what follows comes from me, not from these musicians, so if something doesn't make sense, please blame me, not them.

And now the press release ideas.

I

[The Caramoor situation (see my earlier post on a Caramoor press release): the first performance of Beethoven's Ninth at a long-established music festival.]

A Different Ninth

“We've never played Beethoven's Ninth at the Dunwich Festival. Why are we playing it now?”

Music Director Wilbur Whateley says: “I have my own view of Beethoven's Ninth. To me, the interesting part isn't the famous ‘Ode to Joy’ at the end, with the big tune that everybody knows. I care more about the struggle that leads up to that. Beethoven didn't think that joy comes easily.”

Adds Dunwich Festival executive director Henry Armitage: “We've never done this piece before because we've always thought of ourselves as an intimate festival. Beethoven's Ninth, by contrast, is supposed to be huge and overpowering. But Beethoven himself didn't conduct it with many musicians, and Wilbur Whateley thinks the inner turmoil in the music comes through more clearly with a smaller orchestra. We're going to take a chance on that, and do something that we've never done before.”

[I hope it's clear that I made all of this up. I don't know what Caramoor or its music director, Peter Oundjian, were thinking.]

II

**Arkham Symphony Plays
Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique***

Music Director: "It's a piece that always gives me trouble."

I won't try to write this one, but the music director could say (as one conductor really did once say to me) something like this: "I will conduct this piece four times on this concert series, and I probably will make it go the way I want it only once." She then could explain what makes the piece so difficult, and which moments in it are especially hard. I can imagine that many music directors wouldn't want to reveal such things, especially since the public then could judge whether the performance had been successful. But some conductors might actually enjoy that. I just recently wrote a program note for the Cleveland Orchestra, for which I talked extensively with their music director, Franz Welser-Möst. Franz very much wanted the note to convey his thoughts about the piece, and was delighted when I quoted things he'd asked the orchestra to do in rehearsals.

III

"It Ought to Sound Raw!"

Miskatonic Orchestra Plays *The Rite of Spring*

Cthulu Hall, February 25, 26, 27 at 8 PM

[Instead of starting with the normal—and often stultifying—who, what, when, and where, this press release starts like a magazine piece, with a narrative that's meant to draw the reader in. But that leaves the place, dates, and times of the performances unstated. So I put them in a headline.]

Why isn't the orchestra's principal bassoonist [I'm not going to make up any names] happy when she plays *The Rite of Spring*? You'd think she ought to be—the piece begins with the most famous bassoon solo ever written, and everybody in our concert hall will be listening to her.

But our bassoonist isn't happy. "It's a wonderful moment," she says, "but it's a little too easy. All we bassoonists learn to play this solo when we're in school, and by the time we get to an orchestra like this, we can play it very smoothly.

"Should it sound smooth, though?" she asks. "The piece depicts a violent pagan sacrifice. And so the opening bassoon solo should sound weird and scary. Stravinsky wrote it very high. I think it's higher than anything ever written for the bassoon before that. So I think he wanted it to sound strange, and really edgy.

"I've always wanted to play it like that, and with our new conductor, I finally can. He thinks the whole piece should sound weird and edgy. He says it ought to sound raw."

IV

A Fearless Look at Life

Dunwich Philharmonic Plays Mahler's 7th Symphony

{This press release would quote the Dunwich music director.}

“Of all Mahler's works, it may well be the astonishingly ‘modern’ Seventh Symphony that most fully expresses the mayhem of living in the contemporary world. It lays out the conflicts and contrasts, then offers a kind of alternative refuge—dream-like, entrancing ‘night music.’ In the end, though, it is in this world, not some remote afterlife, that this symphony finds its true victory. It seems to say: ‘This is life. It's rough—but I am going to look it square in the face, and win.’”

[I stole this from Benjamin Zander and the Boston Philharmonic, who described the symphony in these words on their website. The headline is my own. Apologies for taking their powerful description and bending it to my own purposes, which aren't necessarily theirs.]

V

A Difficult Piece that Hardly Anybody Likes

[This would be a press release for a violin recital.]

“Maybe I'm crazy to play the Schoenberg *Phantasy* on my recital,” confesses violinist Erich Zann. “It's just insanely difficult, and Schoenberg isn't exactly a composer that everybody likes.”

“But this was the first piece I decided on, when I put this program together. There's something so wistful about it. I know it's almost impossible just to get the notes in tune, but I love this piece, and I hope that when the audience hears it, I can make them love it, too.”

VI

Radiance

**St. Louis Symphony
Brings Deeply Touching Program
to Carnegie Hall**

Mozart	<i>Overture to The Magic Flute</i>
Morton Feldman	<i>Coptic Light</i>
Mahler	<i>Das Lied von der Erde</i>

Each of these pieces seems to glow with a radiant inner light. Mozart's overture takes that radiance from the opera it introduces, which tells a fairytale of good triumphing over evil. Mahler's music

glows with the deepest possible acceptance of everything profound in life. And Morton Feldman transmutes into sound the intricate design of radiant Coptic tapestries—which will be shown in all their glowing color on a screen while the music plays.

[The St. Louis Symphony really did play this program in St. Louis and at Carnegie Hall some years ago, under their music director, David Robertson. David and I talked a lot about all the programs he conducted with them that year, and I know that what I wrote here reflects his thoughts as well as mine. I wrote it, in fact, for the Symphony's season brochure, which was wonderfully designed, and much talked about in the orchestra world. It's one of the handsomest brochures of its kind that I've ever seen, and one thing about it is revolutionary—it's completely about the music, and what David thinks about that music. There's no hype, no boilerplate photos of random glitzy stars, "no violinists posing with their violins," as the jealous marketing director of another major orchestra said to me.

[This was a revolution the St. Louis Symphony had first unveiled two years before, with a brochure about Beethoven's nine symphonies (with each symphony described on a page of its own). And they've continued this revolution each year since. I have to confess that I played a part—I've written descriptions of all the concerts. But that's only one small part of what goes into these brochures. The credit really goes to Stephen Duncan, the former marketing director who thought of doing these brochures this way, and to Carol Stanton, the Symphony's in-house designer, whose contribution goes way beyond design.

[That was years ago, though. As is the way, so often, in the orchestra world, the innovation came and then went, as people and circumstances changed at the Symphony. I don't think the changes in the brochure — impressive as I found them — sold many tickets. So on to whatever came next. But the brochures (which I hope to scan and put online) are still pretty great.

[I changed the wording of my blurb a bit, since here I have more space than I originally had.]

VII

Stravinsky Would Have Hated It

His *Apollo* Shares a Program with Strauss's *Alpine Symphony*

[This was a program Roberto Abbado was really going to do with the Philadelphia Orchestra—two works that don't just not belong together, but probably shouldn't even be mentioned in the same sentence. I was writing blurbs for the orchestra's brochure, and for this concert wrote one that said something like, "Stravinsky would have hated this program. He hated Strauss and everything Strauss stood for, and it's easy to understand why. His music is..." — but here I've lost the thread, because Abbado cancelled, the program was changed, and I deleted my blurb for it. Wish I hadn't.

I described, as well as I could in just a few words, what Stravinsky's music is like, and why Strauss's work is so opposed to it. I then suggested that anyone who went to the concert could choose sides. The orchestra, to my complete delight, had no problem with this blurb, and would have printed it in their season brochure if the program hadn't changed.]

VIII

Casting a Spell of Peace:

Kingsport Quartet Plays Beethoven

The Kingsport Quartet will start its annual three-concert series at the Dunwich Festival on July 13 at 7:30 PM in Sarnath Auditorium. The program features Beethoven's String Quartet in E flat major, Op. 74, a work that moves these musicians very deeply.

"When we first got together," says violist Asenath Derby, "we had trouble getting along. The details don't matter now, but we'd get angry at rehearsals, and there was one of us the others decided that they didn't like.

"But when we started working on Beethoven's Op. 74, things began to change. The slow movement seemed so beautiful that it somehow spoke to us. I know this might sound silly, but it taught us how to get along. We solved all our differences, and we've been very close ever since."

VIII

Dancing

"A friend of mine was teasing me," says the music director of the Miskatonic Orchestra. "She said that Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* isn't really an orchestral showpiece, as everybody thinks it is. 'Where's the solo for the contrabassoon?' she asked me. 'That would sound sensational! The instrument just growls. And why isn't there a lot of splashy music for percussion?'

"I told her that Bartok didn't want to be splashy. I think he wanted the music to be very Hungarian, and above all to be connected to Hungarian folk dance. I hear dance music in every bar of this score, and I've tried to get the orchestra to play the piece that way."

IX

The Viola: Triumphant at Last

"Everybody laughs at my instrument," says violist Thomas Obey. "Any musician can tell you viola jokes. You know, like how can you tell when a violist is playing out of tune? The bow moves!

“OK, I can live with that. We spend all our time playing unobtrusively in the middle of the orchestra. We rarely get a solo. But it really irks me when we *do* get a solo, and someone wants to take it away from us!

“That’s how I feel about the Brahms sonatas that can be played either on the viola or the clarinet. Everybody thinks the clarinet version is the real one, and the viola is only an afterthought. Well, I don’t agree with that! And I don’t think Brahms did, either. And when I get finished playing these sonatas on my ‘Extreme Viola’ concert series, you’re going to forget that the clarinet even exists.”

Someone’s sure to say, “Well, fine, Sandow picked unusual musicians, with something unusual to say. And he picked brave ones, who are willing to expose themselves before the public.”

There’s some truth to that. But behind every performance, there’s a story buried. Not all of them might be gripping, but they all mean something. The musicians themselves might not think to tell them, but if you talk to them long enough, the stories will emerge. This, I grant you, means that publicists need two skills that haven’t been in their job description up to now. They really have to know the music they’re writing publicity about, and they have to know how to interview their clients, to unearth the stories, feelings, ideas, and points of view that might interest a wider public.

Maybe publicists don’t have these skills. But maybe they need them! Doesn’t publicity, as I’ve (clumsily, I fear) tried to reinvent it here, make classical music seem much more engaging than it usually comes off in the average press release? And rather than dumb things down, haven’t I simply reported what musicians actually say?

One last issue. Am I highlighting frivolous things in all this? There’s a purist streak in classical music, reflected in most program notes, that favors historical and structural commentary: “In this work, Mahler’s innovations in the use of sonata form are in some ways very striking.” If you think talk like that will draw an audience, feel free to try it. My own view is that these things are the advanced course, and that very few people, now or in the past, have ever gone to concerts to contemplate them. Musicians, in my experience, are far more likely to talk about human issues in the music that they make. And it’s through these, I’d think, that we can give classical music a human face, and connect to the audience we badly need to reach.

Many thanks to Mariss Jansons, Franz Welser-Möst, the principal bassoonist of a major orchestra I won’t name, David Robertson, the Boston Philharmonic, and to two of my Juilliard students, Glenda Goodman and Fernando Vela. And apologies once more for taking all these things I’ve found or have been told, and using them for my own purposes. I hope I haven’t rephrased anything in any way that would bother the person who originally said or wrote it.