



# Music Preview or Review

## Writing Box

Do you turn to your friend after you've seen a concert – rock, folk, classical, alt, Gospel, etc. – to share what you thought were the highlights? Do you critique new albums for family members? Do you get excited when you hear about a show coming to town and want to share that news with others? If so, writing previews or reviews might be the genres for you!

### What is a music preview or review?

Writers anticipate music events in a **preview** or evaluate them in a **review**. In a preview, for example, the writer shares impressions about the music, hoping to interest potential audience members in attending or listening to an upcoming event, recording, YouTube, livestream, etc. A review on the other hand, documents the event and provides informative details, so that you might imagine you were there or might want to attend a similar performance or show. Previews and reviews also develop a general appreciation for music.

## What is music preview or review writing?

Whether you're writing a preview or review, your piece will be organized around these four general categories: *Description, Analysis, Interpretation (meaning), and Judgement* (from Edmund Burke Feldman's "Model of Art Criticism"). Additionally, you will follow many of the same writing guidelines for both previews and reviews, though there are some significant differences.

A strong preview or review remains a readable, creative, objective, and engaging piece based on description, personal critique or criticism, and historical perspective. This creative process also allows you to express your individual opinions and personal tastes. Additionally, the writer informs, educates, and entertains readers. While length varies, a preview tends to be shorter and less detailed than a review, which often runs about 450+ words.

First let's discuss writing a music preview, then build on these ideas in order to write a review.

## What are the important components of a music preview?

### *Preparation*

A preview excites, informs and motivates the reader. In preparation, you need to investigate pertinent facts and history about the performers and the work(s) that may be on the upcoming concert. Assess the content, plus the purpose of the music and genre, as well as familiarize yourself with the performers. To that end:

1. **Learn** about the performers – the ensemble, soloists/lead artists, conductor, etc. Consult websites, articles, and interviews. What's interesting about artists' backgrounds? What have critics mentioned about previous performances? What are these performer's specialties? What should a listener expect from these artists? What remain their usual strong and/or weak points? What instruments

are used? Do the pieces often tell a story? Also consider what you relate to and enjoy; what pulls you in to these performances and to the music made by these performers?

2. **Research** the genre – its usual characteristics and purpose. Think in musical terms such as melody, rhythm, and harmony. Who wrote the music and what is their general style, form and sound? Does the music fit into or break with tradition? What about the lyrics and language(s) used (if pertinent)? Who wrote them? How do the instruments enhance or detract? Where is this music usually performed – coffee houses, jazz clubs, arenas, historic auditoriums?

3. **Listen and watch** several examples by the performers and/or of a particular music selection; take notes. What interesting details do you notice? Document your feelings and responses. Why should others want to experience this music?

4. **Decide** which 2-3 specific points to write about in more detail in order to capture your reader's attention. For example, if you know specific pieces that will be included in the concert, research the background of one to focus on. Or, if you've heard the group previously in person, discuss your experience!

5. **Think about your readers** (i.e., your audience) – professional musicians, singer-songwriters, students. What information and reflections might be of most interest to this group?

6. Finally, **outline specific points** to include in this preview.

### *Writing*

Follow this general outline as you write. Note where the 4 parts of a critique – *Description, Analysis, Interpretation, and Judgement* – might occur. Also, consult with the specific newspaper, blog, etc., for guidelines about writing style, as well as when to submit your article.

#### *Introduction (1 paragraph):*

- Start with a catchy paragraph that describes your central idea or opinion about the concert/recording. Establish your point-of-view: Is this a ground-breaking album by a traditional band or is the group

simply re-using old ideas? What's the new take here on an older piece of music? What does the new soloist bring to the piece?

- Describe in very general terms the *who* (the performers), *what* (the piece), *why* (the occasion), *when* (the date and time), and *where* (the venue). (*Description*)

*Body (2-3 short paragraphs)*: Use one paragraph each to bring out concrete points of interest about the artists/music/performance/composer. Start with the most interesting fact/anecdote/observation. You might cover:

- Background information (*Description*)
- How the performers/music fit within the larger cultural context (*Analysis*)
- Personal insights or anecdotes and/or reactions to the performers and their music (*Description, Analysis, Interpretation*)
- Emotions, meaning, and messages you uncover when you dig beneath the surface (*Analysis*)
- Critical interpretation of the performers and or music, with emphasis on the positive (as the writer hopes to intrigue the reader to become a listener!). Back up opinions with specific points from the performance or understanding of the music. Certainly use sensory details to best convey the spirit and energy of the artists. What's special about this music and performers? (*Interpretation and Judgement*)

*Summary (one paragraph)*: Pull the preview together by referring to your opening statement and connecting that to your primary points. However, include here one final new idea, fresh perspective or personal observation to end the piece with snappy authority and an invitation to listen or attend a concert! (*Description, Analysis, Interpretation, and Judgement*)

## What are the important components of a music review?

While a music review engages, informs, and motivates readers, it also presents an in-depth critique of the performance and musical works. Therefore, you'll need more *Preparation*, in addition to more paragraphs in the Body devoted to *Analysis*, *Interpretation and Judgement* of the performances of the specific pieces of music.

### *Preparation*

In addition to ideas outlined above under Music Preview, for a Review, add the following steps to your research and before-concert listening in these categories:

1. **Learn:** Identify the pieces and performers for the concert.
2. **Research**
  - Carefully study the background of the composer(s), genres, and specific pieces. Learn about the type and history of instruments used. Are these typical of the genre? Is this a normal piece for this composer? An oft-used form? A consistent sound?
  - Place the composer/work in context: What was happening historically, philosophically, in related arts, etc., at the time the piece was written?
  - Discover why or for whom the music was written; how does that affect its meaning?
3. **Listen** to each of the pieces (on YouTube, CD, etc., if available) all the way through at least twice to develop a deep understanding of the music. Choose recordings by a different group or ensemble than will be on your concert. Focus on different aspects of the performance (dynamics, soloist's emotional impact, conductor's gestures, etc.) during each listen. You'll then be ready to compare and contrast your live concert to these other interpretations that you've already studied.
  - **IMPORTANT:** Take thorough notes (perhaps on a program, if provided) during the concert.
4. **Decide**

- Ask: How does the music compare to other examples of similar genre? How is it similar or different? What stands out as unique? What works and what doesn't in the composition? In the performance?
  - Ask: How does this particular work compare or contrast to others by the same composer? What grabs the listener's attention in this piece? What makes the work unique?
  - After attending the concert, but before beginning to write, take time to reflect on your reactions: Was the concert successful? What generated emotional responses? Which parts seemed especially exciting or good and why? What parts of the performance stood out? What seemed disappointing? Be ready to explain these reactions to readers, citing specific parts of the program as examples.
  - Compare the live performance (YouTube, livestream, recording, etc.) to earlier recordings studied.
  - Consider how this performance compares or contrasts with others by the same artist(s). What makes this performance noteworthy?
5. **Readers** of music reviews want more in-depth analysis, comparison and contrast, as well historical perspective than in a typical preview.
6. **Outline**
- Ponder and organize thoughts – positive and negative – in response to the whole performance.
  - Think: What seems most interesting? These are points to write about in detail.

### *Writing*

For a music review, you'll want to write as soon after the concert as possible with constant referral to the notes you took from pre-concert listening, and most importantly to those you took while attending the live (or recorded) concert itself. Again, follow suggestions above for writing a preview, but also incorporate the following:

Introduction (1-2 paragraphs): As in the preview, though perhaps with a more serious or focused tone. (*Description*)

Body (3-5 paragraphs): Dedicate one paragraph to each primary point, such as: history and critique of each composer, selection or movement performed; analysis of the success of the soloist; description and judgement of the conductor. Additionally:

- Be sure to weave in your personal response, as well as description and analysis of the reaction of the audience.
- Always support your critique and opinions by historical facts and/or observations from the concert itself.
- For a long concert, especially, concentrate on 2-3 major sections, movements or shorter works. (*Analysis, Interpretation, Judgement*)
- Always provide background information. (*Description*)
- Explain how the piece fits within the larger cultural context. (*Analysis*)
- For “flavor” be ready to include observations about the performance space, demeanor of the performers, or audience reactions. (*Description*)
- Present a critical interpretation of the performance, with emphasis on the positive (as the writer hopes to intrigue the reader to become a listener!). Back up opinions with specific points from the performance or understanding of the music. Reference other music to explain why this recording/performance worked well or needed more polish. Again, use sensory details to describe special attributes about the work and/or performance. (*Interpretation and Judgement*)

Summary: As you pull the review together, do present at least one more idea or perspective. You may also wish to present a challenge to the reader such as: how might this performance have been improved? Or, is there an even better

example of this genre by the composer and why? (*Description, Analysis, Interpretation, and Judgement*)

## Tips

- Be honest.
- Focus on feelings.
- Write clearly. Be direct.
- Find a balance between reporting on a concert and critiquing.
- Avoid clichés and colloquialisms, slang, or generic phrases such as: “*This was interesting.*”
- Make sure you know the space and word limitations for the preview or review.
- Read and study multiple reviews to analyze style and content.
- Create your own vivid, lively writer’s “voice.”
- Listen for and write about what’s unusual.
- Develop a list of colorful adjectives and descriptors such as: *energetic, bold, colorful, mellow, crisp, warm, expressive, intense, tender, forceful*, etc.
- Incorporate musical terms – *dynamics, tempo, melodic line, rubato, phrasing, tone, orchestration, rhythm, counterpoint, strings, percussion*, etc.
- Include factual details.
- Use similes, such as: *Her voice quality was as gritty as sandpaper.*
- If a musician, the writer should inject the piece with personal experiences.
- Employ a few quotes perhaps from other reviewers, the composer, the performers, etc.
- Decide if you want to include photos or other images (such as an album cover).
- Edit thoroughly for spelling, punctuation, etc.
- Ask, what makes this Review memorable? Does the opening grab attention?
- Does the last paragraph provide a strong, overarching conclusion?
- Read aloud and/or ask a friend to read and make suggestions.
- Enjoy yourself! Write first and edit later.



For additional help in writing music previews and reviews, YpsiWrites offers one-to-one consulting. For more information, see [ypsiwrites.com](http://ypsiwrites.com).

And if you want to write a music preview or review, *Washtenaw Jewish News* is looking for articles based in people, places, and events in Washtenaw County. Contact [ckinbergeditor@washtenawjewishnews.org](mailto:ckinbergeditor@washtenawjewishnews.org) for more information.

## Some Samples to Help as You Write Your Own Music Previews and Reviews

Sample of Music Preview

From City Beat online accessed 3/9/2021, 5 PM

<https://www.citybeat.com/home/article/13023941/concert-previews>

[Mike Breen](#), Sep 9, 1999 2 PM

### Saturday

While you'll probably find no music aficionado who will argue that Blues music isn't one of the greatest indigenous art forms to emerge from American culture, it can certainly be argued that it has been one of the more invariable forms of music to emerge in the United States. While the Blues, of course, has mutated from a variety of forms and has certainly evolved into several varied styles, today when you call something "Blues," you pretty much know what you're going to get. The basic chord patterns and mannerisms are tattooed into the art form with such a resonance that few seem willing to retool the mechanics to take the art form into any fresh — or at least unexpected — direction. There are masters who take individual components of

the music to new levels, but when's the last time you heard a Blues album and got more than you bargained for?

(Introduction; *Description and Analysis*)

Young guitarist/singer/songwriter **Corey Harris** may not be dismantling the Blues from the inside, but he's certainly fiddling around gleefully with the established boundaries. Harris, a former street musician, was vaulted into the international Blues scene with his *Between Midnight and Day*, on which Harris exhibited an uncanny ability to re-create legit Delta Blues almost flawlessly. But even then, there were little quirks in his approach that suggested he would move beyond simple re-creation, and in interviews, Harris always fought against being called a classicist.

(Body; *Interpretation*)

While he has clear respect for the music, Harris' latest, *Greens From the Garden*, takes the Blues, spills it all over the table, wipes it up and wrings it out with a joyous spirit that is, to say the least, a treat to behold. *Greens* has the feel of a straight-up, back-porch jam session, a gritty production allowing Harris' organic experiments to simmer, boil or explode at any given moment. Harris is part scientist, mixing tropical exotic rhythms from the Mambo to Reggae Dub, and part ringleader, rolling into Folk, Rock and traditional New Orleans stomps like the party depends on it (and it does). Harris' approach to the Blues is just the kind of attitude that seems vital for taking the music into the next century and *Greens From the Garden* can serve as a wake-up call to any Blues musician interested in progressing beyond everyone's perception.

(Summary; *Judgement*)

At the Blues to the Point festival at Point Park in Carrolton, Ky. (call 800-325-4290 for details).

## Sample of Music Review

Updated Apr 03, 2019; Posted Nov 16, 2014

By [Susan Isaacs Nisbett | Special to the Ann Arbor News](#) accessed 3/9/21, 9 PM:

[https://www.mlive.com/entertainment/ann-arbor/2014/11/tchaikovsky\\_was\\_the\\_draw\\_but\\_t.html](https://www.mlive.com/entertainment/ann-arbor/2014/11/tchaikovsky_was_the_draw_but_t.html)

It's all about the company you keep. And in the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra's "Tchaikovsky & Friends" concert Saturday night at the Michigan Theater, classical music's Mr. T was moving in the right circles.

(Introduction: *Description*)

Those circles included, first and foremost, pianist Anton Nel, back for his ninth appearance with the A2SO, in the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1. An internationally renowned pianist formerly on the University of Michigan faculty, Nel is a local favorite, and the hall was packed to hear him. Meanwhile, Tchaikovsky's other pals on the program – the composers Rossini and Schumann – were good company both for Nel and for the audience.

(Body; *Description*)

Arie Lipsky, the orchestra's music director and conductor, is avowedly fond of contrasts, and you didn't have to throw a baton far to hit one in this show.

(*Analysis*)

There's hardly a piece in the orchestral repertoire more famous or iconic than the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 – the monumental, virtuoso concerto that helped earn Van Cliburn a hero's Cold War ticker-tape parade in 1958, when it catapulted him to victory in the Moscow International Tchaikovsky Competition.

And while there are pieces less famous than Rossini's "Overture to La Scala di Seta" – the opera itself, for example – the overture, which began Saturday's program, is hardly well-known fare.

It's a little gem, though, this 1812 Rossini overture, a spun-sugar bauble in best Rossini style, effervescent and buoyant, with nifty licks for the winds, oboe and flute particularly. Those guys earned their keep in the first five minutes of the show.

*(Interpretation)*

The overture must have gotten the audience's pulse up: In the Schumann "Rhenish" Symphony (No. 3 in E-flat Major) that followed, everyone wanted to applaud at the end of each movement. That's OK – folks did that, too, apparently, at the work's 1851 premiere.

*(Description)*

I shared most, if not all of the audience enthusiasm. Lipsky and the orchestra brilliantly captured the majesty and vaulting propulsion of the first movement, echoed in the finale as well; and the brass and low strings were stellar in the starring roles Schumann assigned them. But fleeting pitch problems in the second and third movements at key moments took me out of the "zone."


*(Judgement)*


Nothing like the bracing opening of the Tchaikovsky concerto to find the way back, though. What a call to attention Tchaikovsky crafted in the resounding chords marching up the keyboard; they were rivetingly brilliant and thundering in Nel's hands on Saturday.

*(Interpretation and Judgement)*

Like other big Romantic piano concertos, the Tchaikovsky First places incredible virtuoso demands on the soloist – demands met by Nel with playing that was a model of drive and utter, admirable clarity of articulation and pedaling.

(Judgement) 

But it is also a concerto of contrasts – much like Saturday’s concert itself. It goes from 0 to 90 in nano-seconds – and then right back again; it demands steely, Olympian power and the total lyricism we love in Tchaikovsky the ballet composer. If the drive of Nel’s playing will stay with me, so will the care with which he shaped every sighing slur. He found good company in the orchestra along the way. It was, indeed, an evening of Tchaikovsky both and, and with, friends. 

(Summary; Analysis; Interpretation; and Judgement) 

## Resources

1. Check local and national publications samples of reviews such as the *Ann Arbor Observer*, MLive.com, *New Yorker Magazine*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, various music magazines, etc., all online, in libraries, or available in print by subscription.
2. Consult websites for bios of composers, conductors, ensembles, and soloists, or other performers.
3. Study previous previews or reviews of other performances by these performers.
4. Find online Program Notes (if provided) – e.g. for Detroit Symphony or University Music Society – for the present concert or Notes by other ensembles for previous performances.
5. Examine available Press Releases
6. Identify scores, available online (IMSLP) or from libraries.

7. Edmund Burke Feldman's "Model of Art Criticism":

[https://visualartsiwacore.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/5/0/12506576/art\\_invento  
ry\\_explanation\\_w\\_reading\\_skill\\_notations.pdf](https://visualartsiwacore.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/5/0/12506576/art_invento<br/>ry_explanation_w_reading_skill_notations.pdf).