

# PREPARING A CONCERT PROGRAM

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This chapter is a condensed and reworded version of material in *The Recorder Book* by Kenneth Wollitz (Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) and is written with permission from the author.

For fuller coverage of the topics presented here, we recommend reading Chapter 6 of his book or the reprint in *American Recorder*, Vol. XXII, No. 4 (November 1981), pp. 103-11.

An ensemble's primary goal in giving a concert is to please the audience. In order to prepare a successful program, a number of things must be taken into consideration. They are discussed briefly below.

## Order of Presentation

Your opening number should be one that is sure to please and one that you are sure to play well. It should be a cheerful selection that will put your audience in a positive frame of mind. A familiar piece that most of the listeners already know would be an excellent choice. The longest, most complex offering should come at the end of the first part if there is an intermission, or two-thirds to three-quarters of the way through if there is no intermission. The part after this weighty selection should consist of lighter pieces, ending with the brightest one of all.

## Grouping of Pieces

If your program consists wholly of Medieval and Renaissance pieces, most of which are short, you won't want the audience to applaud after every piece. Group the pieces according to musical genre: e.g., all the chansons in one group, madrigals in another, fantasias in another, a dance suite in another, etc. Also, aim for balance within each group. For example, a serious fantasia in a minor key could be followed by a lighter one in a major key, and a wistful chanson could be placed between two cheerful ones. Try to minimize the space between pieces in a given group to keep your listeners' minds from wandering.

## Dance Suites

The selections in a Renaissance dance suite should be played *segue*: a pavane immediately followed by a galliard, immediately followed by bransles or other dances. All the chosen dances should be of the same period and character. For example, Franco-Flemish dances of the mid-sixteenth century selected from different sources (Attaignant, Gervaise, Phalèse, Susato, etc.) would go well together, but dances by Brade, Dowland, or Holborne would not fit in with them. The dances should all be in the same key or in related keys such as C major, G major, and G minor.

Contrast can be achieved in a dance-suite performance in various ways, depending upon the instrumental forces available. You could use the technique of starting one piece with the melody line only and adding other instruments on

the repeat. Another possibility would be doubling the top line of a low-lying piece at the octave with a sopranino recorder. If you have access to other instruments, you could do one dance with a low consort (i.e., an octave lower than the SATB recorder combination). This could be a krummhorn or viol consort or a combination of tenor and bass recorders with lower instruments. These could include bass krummhorn or cornamuse, dulcian, rackett, sackbut, guitar, bass viol, or cello (if played softly without vibrato). And of course, an appropriate rhythmic pattern played on tambourine or hand drum would make an excellent accompaniment for mid-sixteenth-century dance music.

### **Types of Program**

There are two basic kinds of programs: *potpourri* and *thematic*. A potpourri program includes a variety of musical genres and music from various countries and periods. The pieces should be grouped by period but not necessarily in chronological order. A hypothetical potpourri program might begin with a group of Medieval songs and/or dances, followed by a group of Franco-Flemish Renaissance pieces. If a Baroque offering such as a trio sonata or cantata is included, it will probably be the longest and weightiest piece in the concert and will fit best in the third spot. The program should end with lighter selections such as Elizabethan songs and dances.

There are many possibilities for a thematic program, but it should be guided by two principles. (1) It should be planned carefully, balancing light and serious selections in a pleasing order. (2) The chosen pieces should really illustrate the theme of the program. The theme could be broad (music of Spain), or more specific (16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish music), or narrowly specific (*Cantigas de Santa Maria*). A seasonal theme is another possibility (e.g., music depicting the joys of spring), or a holiday-related program (Christmas music from many lands), or a theme involving a particular musical genre (cantus firmus compositions). Whatever theme you choose, you will need reference books and catalogs to help you find appropriate music. Planning a thematic program should be an enjoyable as well as educational experience.

### **Length of Program**

Don't make your program so long that the audience loses interest. Forty to forty-five minutes is a good length for a concert without an intermission, eighty to ninety minutes with an intermission. Time your pieces. Count on 20 to 25 minutes of actual playing without an intermission and 40 to 45 if there is an intermission. The rest of the time will be taken up with changes in instrumentation and seating, explanatory remarks (if you decide to include any), and applause. Explanatory comments should be clearly audible. They should be friendly and informative, but also brief. Please don't turn a concert into a lecture.

## **Making a Convincing Stage Appearance**

Everything you do on stage should have been well-rehearsed. That includes tuning chords, starting gestures, and cutoffs. Instruments should have been tuned in advance and music placed in the proper order. Entrances, exits, and bows need to be rehearsed, too. Throughout the concert you need to convince your audience that you know what you're doing.

## **Dealing with Performance Nerves**

Everyone feels excited to some extent, pleasantly or otherwise, and tends to be easily distracted when playing for an audience. The best way to minimize performance nerves is to be well-prepared. Practice your individual parts carefully at home and rehearse thoroughly as a group. Eliminate pieces that don't go well in rehearsal. Try to simulate the actual performance during rehearsals. Expect to be excited and distracted, and practice concentration. If you are well prepared during the performance and keep your concentration, you will be warmly received by your audience.