

Thematic Programming

Crafting enlightening concerts and inspiring series

The phenomenon of thematic programming is explored in depth, confronting its challenges and revealing its incredible power to engage listeners in the long term. (See Programs by David Finckel and Wu Han for thematic programs presented by the Chamber Music Society and Music@Menlo, which can be adapted to suit the needs of performers, presenters and producers).

What is “thematic programming”?

Thematic programming employs a single concept or idea that guides the selection of works for a single program or for an entire series, or season, of concerts. The idea can be applied loosely or rigorously.

Why program thematically?

When a concert or series approaches the vast literature of classical music from a specific perspective, the listener is provided a guided musical tour. There is a story to follow which provides **context**, which is in today’s world of increasingly less-musically trained listeners, perhaps the most important tool for the engagement of listeners, as well as for generating deep understanding and interpretive integrity of performers.

Thematic programming provides a logical opportunity for presenters, producers and artists to prepare their listeners for a concert. A prior knowledge of a program’s content adds greatly to its appreciation, and listeners enter the concert hall empowered rather than intimidated or confused. The talking points that accompany a thematically-designed program represent a 100% increase in opportunity for audience engagement and development, through interviews, articles, e-mails, advertisements, brochures, pre-concert lectures, and any events related to the performances, such as season announcements, development events, or board and staff meetings.

Finally, it is a reality that individual pieces of music sound differently, or are perceived differently, depending upon their musical company in the form of the rest of the program. The order in which works are heard also affects the listener’s experience. So the crafting of programs with the listener’s experience in mind is essential, if a presenter wants to speak confidently about the coming concert or season.

How to build a thematic program or series

One does not have to be a trained musician, but a knowledge of the repertoire appropriate for the concerts and series at hand is essential for programming by a producer or presenter. The *Resource Guide to Chamber Music* provides an overview, and further reading will fill in the myriad wonderful details that make classical music such an incomparably rich genre.

A thematically-programmed concert or series is made successful by a combination of assets: first, the presenter should be engaged, excited, committed and knowledgeable about the subject, able to talk about it to staff, board, the public, press, to concert managers and to the artists themselves. Second, the

presenter needs to have selected a theme which will suit the audience at hand: all audiences are different in terms of prior listening experience. The presenter's aim should always be to entertain *and* educate. When an audience leaves the concert hall feeling that they not only have had a good time, but have *learned* something in the process, they are ready for more. They are interested to hear the next story told.

Being a thematic programmer

First, if a thematic program is desired, the first and simplest way to find one is to ask the musicians you're interested in presenting if they have any. Most likely they do: most ensembles and individuals today involve themselves in repertoire "projects", often involving multiple concerts. Next possibility is to suggest a thematic idea to a prospective ensemble or artist: "We'd love an all-Beethoven program", or "How about a French program?"

Finally, there is the option (for those with some experience or at least chutzpah!) to create the idea and program(s) from scratch. David and Wu Han have been creating thematically-driven projects since 2002: entire festivals, as in the case of Music@Menlo; smaller festivals such as those contained within a larger season at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center; and single programs organized around a central idea. If you too have the drive and imagination, here is a sampling of

Unifying Themes Ready for Action

The simplest thematic program to create is the **single composer** concert. The composer is the common denominator which ties the works together. The stories of composers' lives, their personalities, their artistic development and journeys, their priorities, their significance in music history, the specific qualities of their music and its origins, are all interesting topic for sharing with listeners.

Still with a composer focus, the **composer pair** program concept offers an enormous number of combinations that provide fascinating listening experiences. Composers who lived at the same time and admired each other, such as Bach and Vivaldi, Mendelssohn and Schumann, Brahms and Schumann, Brahms and Dvorak, Dohnanyi and Bartok, and Shostakovich and Britten, are leading examples of composer pairs, and combining their music on single concerts or throughout a series leads listeners to listen deeply to each composer's works as perhaps influenced or guided by the other.

Still working with composers, the **composer ancestors/heirs** concept allows listeners to hear where a composer's music came from, or, hear how a composer influenced coming generations. And there are many, many combinations: Bach and Mendelssohn, Beethoven and Brahms, Mozart and Tchaikovsky, Smetana and Dvorak, Bartok and Ligeti. The stories being told, and heard, are ones of inspiration and inheritance, of where music comes from, which are wonderful tales of artistic influence and imagination.

Perhaps one of the easiest and varied concepts is the **unfolding of music** theme. This model, for either a single concert or entire series, takes the listener on a sonic journey through time. To stretch it furthest, begin with a work from the baroque and end with a contemporary work, perhaps even a premiere. But segments of the journey can be equally impactful: just hearing, for example, how late Brahms can move to early Berg and Schoenberg is a fascinating, visceral musical experience through which the listener can hear and feel music evolving. In all its forms, the unfolding model educates and empowers audiences, and makes for a wonderful listening adventure.

A delightfully colorful single concert or even an entire series can be built on the idea of **location/culture focus**. The simplest iteration of this programming is the single-location concert: all-French, all-Russian, all-Viennese, etc. Then cultures can be fascinatingly juxtaposed: hearing French music next to Russian music highlights both contrast and commonalities, for example. A standard concert can easily accommodate three cultures of the programmer's choosing.

Another fascinating thematic design is a **bridging-the-ages** program, one that connects musical traditions that occur across the ages. For example, the phenomenon of **chamber concerto** existed has existed since the baroque, and examples of this genre occur throughout the ages. We have Mozart's three concertos for piano and string quartet; Mendelssohn's Double Concerto for Piano, Violin and Strings; Chausson's Concerto for Violin, Piano and String Quartet; and Steven Mackey's Micro-Concerto for ensemble with percussion. Comparing the concept of the concerto through the ages is fascinating and hugely entertaining.

Instrumental genre-centric programs are of course thematic in themselves. String quartets, piano trios, sonata duos, and other combinations of instruments for which a significant amount of compositions exist can easily provide an entire full-length program which is diverse and exciting.

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