How to write a RILM abstract

There is a brief version of this document, with the essential specific concerns, found here.

Abstract content

A RILM abstract ought to convey to the reader every important aspect of the research being reported on. At the same time, nonessential matters should be omitted, so as not to mislead the reader about what the research is concerned with. Do not spend too much time describing the intellectual background of the research. It is more important to deal with the content of the research at hand. In presenting new findings for someone's biography, concentrate on the new findings and do not rehearse the known facts of the person's life and career.

Amount of information

Providing more information, especially personal names, places, and names of institutions, is always a desideratum as long as these are important to the research. (If an article includes a list of names, do not reproduce the list in the abstract unless the article also gives substantial information about each one.) Use full forms of personal names and give institutional names in the original language (with an indication of the nominative case if you are using another case in the text of the abstract). If you are dealing with the study of a manuscript, give its present location (institution and complete shelf number). If you are dealing with specific musical works or scholarly works, give their full titles in the original language. If you are citing one or more elements of a longer work, be sure to indicate where they are found in the longer work (e.g., for arias, give act and number; for songs from cycles, name the cycle and the number of the song being discussed). Be sure to indicate the time period under discussion as precisely as possible. If you use unusual terms, define them. If you are dealing with pedagogy, be sure to indicate the level of education concerned (elementary, secondary, college, or professional).

Stating conclusions

It is essential to state clearly the main conclusion or conclusions given in the item being abstracted. Make sure that you actually identify the conclusions (do not assume that they will be found only at the beginning or the end of the article). However, not all research yields specific conclusions.

Summary

- An abstract should contain only sufficient information for researchers to decide if the item will be useful.

- All factual information should be complete and accurate.
- An abstract should contain all the important words and concepts that will be indexed.

Abstract length

An abstract should not exceed 200 words. You should take into account the length and detail of the item to be abstracted. Most dissertations will require full-length abstracts; some three-page articles can be summarized in 25 words.

Abstract style

Avoid colloquial or informal language and write in complete sentences. Do not include personal views on the value or lack of value of the item being abstracted. Many effective abstracts resemble a single well-shaped paragraph, with topic sentence, development, and conclusion. Writing in the voice of the author (declaratively) yields a more vivid abstract than does describing the author's work, and lends itself to specificity.

Here is a pair of examples of abstracts for Music iconography in Panselli's "Coro", an article in an exhibition catalogue.

> (1) Supports the attribution to Allendro, first proposed by Ridgeway, of the music in Panselli's Coro d'angeli, and suggests that Guido Sforza may have been responsible for the collaboration between composer and artist. The music's iconographic significance is examined. A new reconstruction of it as a canon, rising a whole tone at each repetition, is proposed. It is argued that this canonic design originated with Allendro.

> (2) The musical inscription in the artist Michelangelo Panselli's Coro d'angeli, drawn on a book held by an angel, is by Sandro Allendro, as proposed by Millicent Ridgeway. Guido Sforza may have arranged a collaboration on the painting, bringing together the composer and painter. The text of Allendro's piece relates to the iconographic design as a whole, completing an allegorical portrait of the Sforzas as ideal human beings. A new reconstruction of the music as a canon, which rises a whole tone at each repetition, suggests that the musical work's design was the painter's.

The first of these is descriptive, the second declarative. In theory, one can include the same information with either approach, but in practice, the declarative style forces a writer to be more specific. Where the descriptive version says "the music's iconographic significance is examined," the declarative version says: "The text of Allendro's piece relates to the iconographic design as a whole, completing an allegorical portrait of the Sforzas as ideal human beings." Further, the descriptive style normally involves the writer in a series of passive constructions, as in the present case (i.e., the last three sentences of the first example).

Incidentally, the second abstract has used complete personal names, which is correct, since none of the people mentioned here are famous enough for instant recognition.

Further examples

The following examples each consist of an abstract with a number of lapses in style, followed by the same abstract rewritten with improvements. The most important point to remember is that the declarative style ("the author speaks") is preferred to the descriptive.

Example 1: Our first example shows clearly that a descriptive abstract gives very little information, compared to a declarative. The first version is descriptive:

> The author attempts a complete reevaluation of Schütz's position in musical history through an examination of all known contemporary biographical and musical sources resulting in a considerable change in our perspective of this composer.

This abstract leaves a number of questions in the reader's mind. What is Schütz's historical position? What method was used to accomplish a reevaluation? Are there any dates, personal names, or names of organizations involved? What conclusion was reached? The following abstract, though not much longer, answers these questions.

> Recent findings in Schütz's biography and on the sources of his music suggest fundamental revisions in our assessment of his personality and artistic profile; in particular, the repertorial emphases set by the German Singbewegung of the 1920s—which still shape the selection of his music most frequently encountered—appear to represent not the core of his creative achievement but the periphery.

Example 2: A 30-page journal article entitled "Recordings in the singing room".

> Proposes a methodology of modern singing.

The source document obviously presents a conclusion—it proposes a new method. The abstract should say what the methodology is.

> Recording technology should be used to supplement the traditional private voice lesson, allowing outstanding singers to offer a wide variety of permanent—if one-sided—"master classes" to an unlimited number of interested students.

Example 3: A book by a well-known scholar, entitled *Schumann at work*

> A critical review of Schumann's method of composing melodies. Schumann's habits of composing are considered as viewed by past scholars, and in the light of new research. Comments by friends, and by Schumann himself, shed light on this question.

The author of this source document obviously had an opinion, but the abstract states neither what that opinion was, how the opinion was formed, nor what conclusions were drawn. What were Schumann's methods? How have they been viewed? Who exactly (full personal name) held those views? Does the book provide a new conclusion? The following abstract shows how much more useful a well-written declarative abstract can be.

The belief widely accepted by scholars that Schumann composed only while in a kind of frenzy, or trance of inspiration, is refuted by many comments in letters and diary entries by him, and by the comments of contemporaries—the most notable admirer being Anton Gerhard Wilhelm von Alpenburg, his nephew. At least 13 remarks by Schumann between 1848 and 1850 refer to having worked hard, "though without much interest".

Example 4: A three-page journal article entitled "Music under the Sublime Porte".

Within the framework of a country existing under Ottoman rule, music flourished.

Seven of the 12 words in this sentence are not necessary. Concisely written, the thought becomes clear:

Music flourished in countries under Ottoman rule.

Examaple 5: Consider a reference, with no abstract, entitled "Schmidt 68: A work by Jaap Devrient?" We assume that Jaap Devrient wrote a work called Schmidt 68, and the index will list the title of this composition under Devrient's name. But if we refer to the source document we discover that the title gives incomplete information, and an abstract is necessary to complete and clarify the information.

The long piano duet listed as number 68 in Hans Schmidt's thematic catalogue of the works of Jean de Millefleurs is actually by Jaap Devrient.

Example 6: An article entitled "Peter Grossklein: Life and works" is probably, judging from the title alone, a general discussion of the composer. The following abstract correctly focuses on the major point of the general discussion, but the writing is not concise and fails to use the author's voice.

After a general discussion of Grossklein's works, the author then attempts to provide a rationale that encompasses the fact that his work took into account musical thought in the context of the philosophical thinking of the symbolist school.

Once again, a declarative abstract with simpler language is better.

Grossklein's works show his deep interest in the musical philosophy of the symbolists.

Example 7: "Gluck on stage", an article.

The author suggests that, to understand the dramatic recitative in works by Gluck, a sound knowledge of the vocal techniques of the actors and vocalists of the 18th century is required on the part of listeners.

(1) The source document contains a conclusion (that listeners should be knowledgeable); thus, a declarative abstract is required; (2) the passive voice should be changed to the active voice; (3) "sound knowledge" and "on the part of" are unnecessarily wordy.

Understanding Gluck's dramatic recitative requires knowledge of the techniques of 18th-c. actors and singers.

Example 8: The abstractor had trouble understanding the article abstracted below, and resorted to quoting the article.

As an opera historian, the author poses questions pertaining to the use of traditional elements in the modern work of U.S. composers. In his opinion, "the past" can be represented in "no other way than by using all elements, including contemporary literature".

If an item is not comprehensible (which happens more frequently than one likes to admit) it should be referred to the author of the item or to some other expert who can write an abstract. Direct quotes from an article are rarely effective summaries. To improve the above abstract, (1) the descriptive style was changed to the declarative; (2) the description of the author was removed; (3) the quotations were integrated into the fabric of the abstract.

All elements, including literature of the period, must be used to understand traditional elements in modern U.S. compositions.

Example 9: A scribal tradition discovered, an important article by a well-known scholar in one of the more serious academic journals.

The author compares nine manuscript psalters from the 14th to the 16th centuries preserved in church archives in western Europe with 24 manuscripts from eastern European sources.

For an important scholarly article, the above abstract is too vague. Factual details are required, in addition to a clear presentation of the author's conclusions: the abstract states "the author compares", but what are the results? The following clarifies and summarizes. Note the inclusion of RISM library sigla with shelf numbers, and the names of libraries in the language of their country.

The so-called St. Kevin Psalters at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin (E-Dpc MS Kev.1234), the Steinhertz Psalters at the Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek, Cologne (D-KNd 9876), and all the psalters in the collection of the Avila Cathedral (E-Ac 12, 34, 35, 36, 37, 453, 1120, 2231) show emendations in many hands apparently over long periods. Psalters in the Kostel Sv. Jakuba, Prague (CZ-Psj MS 3456, 56788, 56798-01), and at the Bazilika Kottatára, Eger (H-EGb ins. 4564-87) show emendations by a succession of apparently official scribes. Study of the emendations reveals a close relationship among all 24 psalters, and variant readings have provided evidence with which to construct a tentative stemma.

Example 10: Music of the Central African pygmies, an article.

Music and dance are important in pygmy culture. Turnbull's recordings of the pygmies were all songs. The UNESCO recordings of pygmies also include flutes. Like their society, their songs have no particular form.

The first sentence may be true, but it is true of so many cultures that it is nearly meaningless; that importance is discussed in the article, not simply stated as it is here. We need to know who Turnbull is, and it matters to know when he made his recordings (more recent recordings often include new practices). "Song" should not be used generically for vocal music (many of Turnbull's recordings are of polyphonic group singing). Also, "pygmy" is a very broad term: Always prefer the term a particular group uses for themselves. Recordings should be designated by the person(s) who made them, not the organization that issued them. Indigenous instrumental terms are favored over generic ones like "flute", though the latter may be used descriptively. The last sentence sounds condescending, mistaking open or flexible forms for formlessness—an inapplicable Western concept. The following abstract addresses these concerns, and conveys much more information in not much more space.

> Assesses the function and value of music and dance in pygmy society, and draws parallels between musical and social structures. Colin Turnbull's recordings of the mButi people, made in the 1950s, present only vocal performances; Simha Arom's recordings of the Benzélé people from the 1960s also include performances on the hindewhu, a one-tone pipe.

Abstracting obituaries

When abstracting obituaries, or other announcement type news items, the following few points should be observed.

The abstract should be brief, but not unnecessarily terse, e.g., "An obituary." is not an abstract. Generally, one or two of two principal reasons qualify an obituary for inclusion in a periodical: (1) the person's "claim to fame", or (2) the person's connection with the topic of the publication (or the place where it is published).

For the RILM abstract, at the very least the person's claim to fame should be stated, e.g., "An obituary for the Venezuelan alto, who died on 1 March 2001." (Thus, the person will be indexed not only under her name as well as under the "obituaries" headword, but also under "performers—voice".) Please note that the exact date of death has been included—something that may not appear in the online version of New Grove for some time.

When there is no author and the Title Entry states "… obituary", it is redundant to start the abstract with "An obituary for…"; opt for a declarative opening, e.g., "X, the general director of the Schenectady Festival, died on…"

The second criterion, i.e., the person's connection with the publication at hand, often betrays the bias of the ostensibly objective obituary. For example, an obituary for Leonard Bernstein in Finnish music quarterly may focus on his 22 visits to Finland and the special relationship he had with Finnish musicians. Ideally, this "angle" should also be reflected in the abstract. ("Bernstein's 22 visits to Finland are highlighted. ")

A checklist for abstractors

All abstracts should supply:

- First names of all authors, translators, collaborators, and subjects. (Initials in place of first names are not acceptable in an English-language reference publication such as RILM.)
- Complete titles of musical works in the original language (in other words, not in translation into English or any other language), with index or opus numbers in their correct form. (Give original-language titles for works only when the work has a given title, however. Translations of words such as intermezzo, sonata, or variation are not necessary.)
- Complete names of all associations, societies, performing groups, religious bodies, academic and government institutions and societies in the language of their country.
- For manuscripts, library name (in the language of its country), location, and shelf number, with RISM siglum for the library.
- Definitions of terms not in Grove or MGG.
- Complete and correct place names in their original language, with the most modern form provided. Amend past names if pertinent.
- Basic bibliographic information (place and date of publication) for articles or books referred to within an abstract.