

Bios for Classical Performers

A “Bio” is an important marketing tool for musicians. Bios are used in booking performance opportunities, seeking publicity for performances, in building an artist’s reputation, and in creating interest and connections to audiences. A musician’s “bio” should NOT be her biography. If you simply give the reader dry facts that outline your life and career thus far, you will put the reader to sleep and this will not help your career! This handout gives you tips and methods for creating a winning Bio—one that presents you professionally and dynamically to readers—no matter what stage in your career you may be. Every musician has interesting material that can be fashioned into a distinctive and compelling bio appropriate to the occasion and audience. This handout shows how!

Basics:

- Your bio should present your most impressive credentials: venues where you’ve performed (the halls and their cities/states/countries), ensembles you’ve performed with, competitions, scholarships, or awards you have won, your range of repertoire, special projects, interesting hobbies, and where and with whom you have studied.
- Bios are written in the third person (use she/he, and Ms./Mr., not “I”).
- A bio is NOT a biography—it should NOT be a chronological record of your life. Do NOT start with “Jane Doe began her studies at age three . . .”
- Do NOT start with your educational credentials—save this for the end of the Bio.
- Stay away from “filler” and from your own sweeping superlatives — leave that up to the critics, and then quote them.
- For purposes of mailing and press kits, bios should be printed on your letterhead and double-spaced for ease of reading.

Concert series and festivals often ask musicians for their bios to use in printed programs and for publicity purposes. Bios in programs give the audience a chance to be impressed with you before you actually get on stage, and they give the audience an impression of you both as a person and as a professional musician. Bios are also routinely used in booking performances. Musicians and/or their managers send bios to club managers or “presenters” (people who organize concert series or festivals), to try to interest them in booking the musicians. Bios used for booking purposes are typically one page documents with letterhead at the top: the name of the soloist/ensemble, instrument(s), address, phone, email, and website address.

It’s typical for musicians to have more than one version of their bios—long and short, or one for promotional materials for booking performances and another for teaching. Keep in mind that publications and concert programs needing your bio information may have strict space requirements (they may request a one paragraph Bio of no more than 200 words, for instance). It’s helpful to have both a short and a long version of your bio to fit different situations, but you should tailor and update your Bio as needed for each opportunity. Keep in mind the intended reader for the particular version you are creating. What a general audience member might want to read in a program is going to be different from what a grant panel would want to see as part of an application, or what a concert or festival presenter would want to read in considering hiring you for a performance. To writing an effective Bio, you need to think about the intended reader(s). If you’re producing a Bio to get bookings, the presenter is going to want to know what repertoire and programming you offer and what relevant performance experience you have.

The main problem with most musicians' bios is that they are boring! They tend to read like laundry lists, with no indication that the musician is an actual person with interests, passions, and intriguing projects. The challenge in writing a bio is to convey what is individual and specific to the musician—what makes this musician tick. So, including interesting or unusual repertoire, hobbies, collaborative projects, and future plans, can mean the difference between a bio (and a musician) that is memorable, and one that is not. You need to create interest in the writing.

Your Bio in 6 Easy Steps

This is the method we recommend for writing a great Bio. Instead of plunging in on a first draft, we've found that using this step-wise method, in the end, will save you time and trouble, and will lead to a better Bio. It's worth the effort!

1. Start by making a 'meta' list of items you might include in your bio. It's good to keep track of all your career-related where you've given performances, repertoire, projects, and awards. If you haven't been keeping track, this will give you a reason to start. Keep this list saved on your computer so you can easily update it. Don't simply rely on your resume for this list, since your bio should include items and info that don't show up on most resumes. List venues (names of hall, city, state, country) where you've performed, names of ensembles you've performed with, names of well-known artists you've collaborated with, festivals, scholarships, recordings, range of repertoire, premiers of works, your teachers, coaches, upcoming projects, etc. Add interesting personal information, such as why and how you became an early music aficionado, where you were born, unusual hobbies, or an interesting quirk such as you began composing for accordion at age three. If you have good quotes from reviews, use them. You can also use quotes from letters of recommendation as long as you have permission from the person you are quoting. Don't worry about order, or writing sentences or paragraphs yet — just make your list as complete as possible.

2. Once you have a list of your most impressive accomplishments, events and personal information, take a stab at choosing the lead. Bios should grab the reader's attention with the first sentence! You may have one particular item that stands out as a good lead or you may end up with 2 or 3 items that make a great grouping (for instance a group of impressive venues where you've performed). Don't start with your educational credentials because the reader will assume that you don't have much professional experience. Instead, save all your educational listings (schools, degrees, teachers, coaches) for the end of your Bio (typically the last paragraph works well). In choosing your opening, think of your intended reader. If the bio you're working on is for booking solo recitals, then don't start with your orchestral experience.

3. After choosing your opening accomplishment, see what similar other items can be grouped together in following paragraphs (i.e. solo performances in one paragraph, chamber in another, upcoming projects in another, etc.)

4. Next, write a draft, dealing with one paragraph topic area at a time. For instance, if you have a grouping of contemporary music performances and premieres, work on a paragraph that concentrates on your commitment and interest in new music. As you write sentences and then paragraphs, alternate referring to yourself by your full name, by Ms. or Mr. So-and-So, and by She/He. Any general statement or description of you must be backed up by specifics, such as ". . . has won top prizes in major US competitions, including first prize in the ABC competition and second prize in the XYZ competition," or ". . . has performed recitals in New England and the Mid-West, on the ABC concert series in Cambridge, MA and the XYZ series in Chicago," or ". . . with a wide repertoire ranging from Monteverdi to Haydn, Schumann and Harbison." Without the specifics backing up your generalizations, you won't sound credible.

Make sure that the sentences in one paragraph are logically linked together and that transitions from one paragraph to the next are smooth. If the previous paragraph discussed solo experience, then the next might start, “Active as a collaborative artist as well, Ms. So-and-So has performed with the ABC quartet and the XYZ trio at the 123 festival in Quebec.”

5. It can be useful to enlist the help of colleagues in writing your bio since people often feel self-conscious in speaking or writing about their own accomplishments — you may not (yet) be your own best spokesperson. Once you’ve completed a draft, make sure you proofread it carefully and then have your colleagues read it and give you constructive criticism. It is typical for musicians to write 3 or 4 drafts before “finalizing” a bio. Remember, you will be continually updating your bio as your career progresses, so your bio, as well as your repertoire list and résumé, are never finished documents — they’re always in flux (so don’t print up more than 5 at a time).

6. Proofread. Proofread again. Then show your bio to three other people and have them proofread and edit. Don’t send something off and then find the mistakes after it’s too late to change.

Useful phrases:

“Her recent recital [chamber music, orchestral, opera, etc.] performances include. . .”

“His 2004-05 season engagements include. . .”

“Ms. XYZ has appeared as a collaborative artist and chamber musician with renowned artists so-and-so and you-know-who.”

“Her primary studies were with So-and-So at the New England Conservatory. She has also worked with. . . or coached with-”

“. . . received his training at. . .” “. . . holds a Master’s degree from. . .”

“. . . currently on the faculty at. . .”

For gig marketing purposes: If you are using your bio to market an ensemble for gigs, weddings, etc. do not assume that all readers are familiar with the instrumentation of a brass or woodwind quintet or a piano trio. Also, your reader may assume that your repertoire and the general sound of the group is different from the reality, so describe the repertoire and the range of sounds your ensemble can deliver. See the Apollo Brass bio example. As you read any bio, don’t get hung up on comparisons. People always feel inadequate when writing a bio. Don’t worry about what you have or haven’t done at this point in your career! Rather, take what you have and tell it in an interesting compelling way. The goal is to get the reader motivated to listen to your demo, or to invite you to audition, or to want to meet you and hear your performance because your Bio sounds interesting!

As you read the sample bios enclosed or any others, instead of comparing your credentials to those that you read, ask yourself what stands out in this bio? Do you get a sense of what this person’s musical interests and passions are? Notice how the bio is structured—is the lead compelling or not? Are the topics of paragraphs clear? What about the order of the information? Does it make sense?

Bio Samples are shown on the following pages, including bios for both individuals and groups.

Below is a fictitious bio we created in the office to demonstrate how specific details can make a bio and a musical personality memorable and compelling. This musician hasn’t yet won a big competition or played Carnegie hall, but has found a way to make a distinct and memorable impression.

Mara Hazzard, Soprano

123 My Street #6 Denver, CO 80220 (303) 555-1212 name@email.com

In the Boston area, soprano Mara Hazzard has appeared as a soloist with the New England Conservatory Chorus, the Boston University Women's Chorus, and the Boston University Collegium Musicum. Ms. Hazzard has also been featured on WCRB broadcasts as soloist and section leader with St. Paul's Cathedral choir. As a chorister, Mara Hazzard has performed with the Choir of Trinity Church, the Boston University Chamber Singers, and the New England Conservatory Chamber Singers. She has performed in Symphony Hall, Jordan Hall, the Tsai Performing Arts Center, and Marsh Chapel.

Pursuing a strong interest in early music, Ms. Hazzard studied and performed at the Austro-American Institute in Vienna in 1994. Based on her own manuscript research of composer Marianna Martines, a contemporary of Mozart, Mara Hazzard produced a modern printed edition of a Martines cantata. Ms. Hazzard performed the Martines cantata at Boston University the following year.

A native of Long Island, Mara Hazzard is currently pursuing a Master's degree at New England Conservatory in Boston, studying voice with Carole Haber. Ms. Hazzard received her Bachelor's degree in music from Boston University, graduating summa cum laude and with departmental honors in Voice.

Ms. Hazzard's upcoming projects include a solo recital at New England Conservatory, solo appearances with the New England Conservatory Extension Division Youth Chorale, and a tour of England with St. Paul's Cathedral Choir. The cathedral choir, with Mara Hazzard as a soloist, will be releasing a CD later this year.

Brian Stinar, tenor

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A native of Estherville, Iowa, tenor Brian Stinar has received critical acclaim for his "powerful vocal artistry" and his "engaging stage presence". He has sung over 25 leading roles including Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, Roméo in *Roméo et Juliette*, Pinkerton in *Madama Butterfly*, Canio in *I Pagliacci*, and Manrico in *Il Trovatore*. Equally at home on the concert stage, Stinar is heard in many pops concerts and oratorios ranging from Handel's *Messiah* to Verdi's *Requiem*. The tenor is proud alumni of Wartburg and Waldorf Colleges and holds his Masters degree from the University of Oklahoma where is a Hoving and Benton-Schmidt scholar and studied in the studio of Salvatore Champagne. In Stinar's early training he also performed Normanno in *Lucia di Lammermoor* as a member of the Apprentice Artist Program for Singers with the Santa Fe Opera and was a finalist in the International Meistersinger Competition and toured in five orchestral concerts during his studies in Graz, Austria with the American Institute of Musical Studies. The Pikes Peak Arts Council recently awarded Stinar the "2006 Best Solo Classical Music Performance" for his role as Calaf in *Turandot* and he garnered praise from Gazette critics, who remarked that "Stinar's ringing tenor brought Calaf vividly to life". Stinar is in his ninth year as a Resident Artist in Voice with Denver School of the Arts where he teaches voice and directs the opera activities.