

# Providing a Unique Musical Experience for Your Ensemble by Commissioning a New Composition

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Simply put, the educational values of the commissioning experience for an ensemble are tremendous. It is always a unique privilege to premiere a composition that has been composed specifically for your ensemble. From the ensemble members experiencing the creative process first hand to the musicians taking serious responsibility for the preparation and performance of the work, commissioning a new work reaches beyond a curriculum of standard repertoire. Many of those names that appear at the upper right hand corner of a musician's music are real, living composers, individuals who create music for artistic endeavors. A unique opportunity occurs when composer, the creator of a musical work, and performer, the interpreter and realizer, are brought together on an artistic project such as a commissioned work. Having been involved in many commissioning projects both as a composer and an educator, I can ascertain that the overall encounter of a commissioning project can be one of the most unique musical experiences that you can provide your musical ensemble.

## **HOW TO GO ABOUT COMMISSIONING A NEW COMPOSITION**

### **Before you contact a composer**

It is important to decide on what parameters you need to dictate to a composer. These will include such items as: duration, difficulty level, date the piece needs to be completed by, as well as any special considerations such as if the piece is meant to be a tribute, a memorial, a dedication, etc. It is also important to decide what the limit of your commissioning fee will be before contacting any composer.

### **Finding a composer**

Composers come in all different shapes and sizes as well as levels of notoriety. An established composer is able to draw in large-paying commissions whereas a younger composer with much less notoriety usually will accept commissions for little pay. Expect to pay more for name composers, but don't ignore rising talent. Many young composers' work may be just as good, and in some cases better than an established composer.

Forget looking in the yellow pages for composers. Your best sources will be through initial contacts with composers attending music conventions and conferences, recommendations from music publishers or band directors at the college or university level, or by contacting a Composers Forum, which many states have.

Once you find a composer who is interest in your commission, you'll need to discuss the parameters that you have already determined. Expect the composer to want specific information such as strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble as well as what instruments are capable of solo material. Most importantly, you'll need to make it clear when your ensemble plans on performing the new work and when you'll need delivery of a score and parts. These days, composers usually provide computer generated score and parts which can be delivered both electronically or as printed music.

### **Determining the commissioning fee**

The fees composers charge can vary from composer to composer. Obviously, the more demand there is for a composer's work, the more s/he will want for a commission. The following list can be used as a rough guide to what many composers are asking for their work:

Grade 2 average length - \$750

Grade 4 average length - \$2,250

Major works - \$5,000 - \$10,000+

Grade 3 average length - \$1,500

Grade 5 average length - \$3,000

You may also find composers who charge by duration such as \$300.00 per minute of music. Choral anthems can range from \$750 to \$1,500. Style and character of the piece can influence the fee. Naturally, a slow piece should require a lower fee than a faster piece with highly complex rhythmic passages. Part extraction, usually done on a computer with a sophisticated music notation program, is generally done by the composer. However, there are still some composer who will charge additionally for part extraction and editing. The commissioning fee usually includes extracting the parts from the score, but don't assume this.

### **Finding additional funds**

Although commissioning a work may appear to be a costly venture, there are many sources of funds which can be tapped into. Local, state, regional and national arts agencies will many times provide grant money for up to one-half of the proposed budget. This money can also include travel expenses for the composer to attend and/or conduct the final rehearsals and premiere performance of their work. Local civic groups such as the Kiwanis, Rotary Clubs, etc., can also assist with funds for art projects benefiting the community. Memorial funds and businesses that support the arts can provide another possible source of funds. It is quite common to combine several funding sources to make a commissioning project possible.

Consortium commissioning is becoming popular and many new compositions are being funded by this means. Consortiums can include other commissioning parties such as other like ensembles. With a consortium commission, each performing ensemble may perform the piece and call it the premiere. Budgetary 'set-asides' may also be a way to fund commissioning projects. For example, an ensemble that sets aside a certain amount of money each year from their budget will eventually reach an amount that would pay for a commission.

### **Contracts to protect you and the composer**

A simple contract for a commission is a good idea and will cover details that might otherwise be overlooked. Some composers will automatically send you a contract to approve and sign immediately after they accept a commission. If the composer does not provide a contract, there is nothing wrong with the commissioning party providing a contract for the composer to approve and sign. The most critical items that should be included in a contract include: 1) the type of musical ensemble, desired length of the piece and level of difficulty, 2) delivery date for score and parts, 3) composer's fee and payment schedule, and 4) any dedication wording that will appear on the score and parts such as "Commissioned by the Grove Lake Symphonic Band, Grove Lake, Oregon - Gene White, Director". Normally, manuscript and publishing rights stay in the composer's possession while the commissioning party will have the sole right to the first performance; but, these items should also be included for clarity in a contract. If a composer is requesting an advanced payment of the commissioning fee (which some do), this should be stated in the contract.

### **The Composer**

The composer gains financially by accepting a commission; however, it is also in the interest of the composer to have the composition recognized as a significant piece of literature and live beyond one performance. It is extremely important to a composer to have a good recording of the piece so that it might be submitted for publication. Remember, if the piece is accepted for publication, it is your ensemble's name as well as your name that appear on the top of each part and on the score. An honest effort at a strong performance and adequate rehearsal time are prerequisites for a good recording and a stellar performance. Some composers will send detailed rehearsal suggestions with the score and parts. Composers also appreciate progress reports during the rehearsal phase such as letters, recordings of rehearsals, and/or phone calls. This is an important part of the interaction between the composer, the director, and the students which makes this such a unique musical experience.

### **The Premiere**

The premiere of a new work is an exciting time for the performing ensemble, the community, the composer, as well as anyone representing a group that has assisted with the funding of the commission. The composer should provide, in ample time, a biographical sketch, photo, and program notes for the piece. Depending on the composer's availability, it is usually desirable to have the composer guest conduct the premiere. If this is possible, the composer should have the chance to rehearse the piece prior to the performance.

The commissioning ensemble should get the most out of its commission using social media and by contacting local media to run articles and information about the commission, the composer, and the performing ensemble prior to the concert. A follow-up article, with photos, after the premiere can also work well to help publicize your efforts. Make sure to recognize all groups that have contributed to the funding of the commissioned piece in the program. This is extremely important for documentation especially for groups that must report back on how their money was spent. Verbal recognition alone does not suffice. In some cases where an individual or group has provided the majority of the fund for a commission, a copy of the score with the composer's signature will be presented to them at an appropriate time.

(Sample Contract)

**CONTRACT FOR THE COMMISSION OF A MUSICAL WORK**

It is agreed that \_\_\_\_\_ (composer) will compose a musical work expressly for \_\_\_\_\_ (commissioning party). The commissioned work is to be of a duration of \_\_\_\_\_ minutes and of a \_\_\_\_\_ level of difficulty. The work will be written for \_\_\_\_\_ (type of music ensemble) and will be \_\_\_\_\_ (any other specifics).

The commission fee shall be \$ \_\_\_\_\_, payable within \_\_\_\_\_ days of the delivery of the work. Black on white photocopies of the score and each part will be delivered to the commissioning party as soon as possible, and no later than \_\_\_\_\_. Duplication of the parts will be the responsibility of the commissioning party.

The commissioning party will have the sole right to the first performance and shall retain a copy of both the full score and one set of parts. The original manuscript score and original set of parts will remain the sole property of the composer. The composer will retain all publishing rights.

If desired, the composer will guest conduct the final rehearsal and premiere of this work for a fee of \$\_\_\_\_\_ plus expenses (travel, lodging, meals).

A dedication to the commissioning party shall appear on the title page of the score and each individual part. The wording should be as follows: \_\_\_\_\_

This contract will be declared null and void if the above specifications are not met.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Composer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Commissioning party

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date