Words & Music

A Conversation with Poets and Composers

ROBERT BODE

Robert Bode
Conductor in Residence
The Ohio State University

Many of us wonder about the process of bringing a new piece of choral music into the world. Where do composers get their inspiration? How do they decide what text to set? I have composer friends who tell me they keep a box of poems by their piano; when they need a text, they dip into the box. If the poem speaks to them, they begin to hear rhythms and snatches of melody, and they're off to the compositional races. There is a complication, though, if the poem was published after 1923: it's not yet in the public domain. Then, the composer is required to seek permission from the poet (or their estate) to set the poem. Famously, some poets—Robert Frost comes to mind—refused to grant permission for composers to set their words. That's why we see so many choral pieces written to biblical texts or to poems from Victorian writers such as Tennyson and Rosetti and the Brownings; it's just easier if the poet is long dead.

As lovely as Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is, however, I doubt that most composers working today would say that poem speaks to the interests and concerns of a modern audience. So, more and more, composers are choosing to collaborate with living poets to create an entirely new work.

For this article, I conducted interviews with four poet/composer teams to ask them about this process of collaboration: Stephen Bock and Rosephanye Powell, Todd Boss and Jake Runestad, Julie Flanders and Carlos Cordero, and Brian Newhouse and Kyle Pederson. I am indebted to these teams for supplying such thoughtful and engaging answers to my questions. If you're like me, you'll be struck by the passion and the joy with which they approach the process of bringing new choral music into the world.

How and when did the two of you begin to collaborate?

Steve Bock: Fred Bock Music has been Rosephanye's publisher for over thirty years, so our publishing collaboration has been going for quite a while (as well as through two generations). In the case of me as a lyricist, that collaboration happened in the fall of 2018 when we collaborated on "Love Will Find a Way." I wrote the poem/text in response to a news story that I was watching on television. I had a feeling that it would be a good lyric for choral piece, so I sent it to Rosephanye to see if she agreed. Thankfully, she liked it and wanted to set it.

Rosephanye Powell: I first came to know Steve when he became president of Fred Bock Music after the untimely passing of his father. He was an award-winning writer in television and film, and I was not surprised to learn that he was a poet and lyricist. Our relationship developed through the years. So, when Steve sent me his poem in 2018, I connected with the heart and depth of feelings behind the words and the person who wrote them. I think that knowing who the lyricist is on both a professional and personal level can make the collaboration a nimble one.

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Jake Runestad: When I moved to Minneapolis in 2011, a dear friend (and fabulous librettist) Mark Campbell suggested I get in touch with poet Todd Boss, who lived in Minneapolis and whose work he read in *The New Yorker*. I sent Todd a message. We met for coffee, and in that first meeting, Todd gave me his first book of poetry, *Yellowrocket,* and I fell in love with his work. I attended some of his readings, we met up for the occasional drink, and gradually our friendship deepened. Several years later, I proposed a collaboration, and we began conversations about what makes a good text for music.

Around that time, I had a commission from Robert Istad and Cal State Fullerton, and so I decided that would be our first project together. Since then, we've collaborated on nine works ranging from "And So I Go On," a double choir meditation on love and loss; to "A Silence Haunts Me," ACDA's Raymond Brock Commission on Beethoven's perseverance in the face of his hearing loss; to "Earth Symphony," a large-scale choral symphony imagining Mother Earth's voice in a post-human world.

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Carlos Cordero: I feel that people begin to collaborate long before they start to "work" on a project together. For Julie and I, it was very important to learn and understand each other as friends, not just artists who might collaborate. It is one of the most beautiful things about working with Julie: I get to know her and we create something, instead of "working with her." This creates such a deeper connection that I believe we are missing in many parts of our fast-paced world.

Julie Flanders: When I first met Carlos, our affinity was immediate and deep. Our conversations, though social, moved immediately to music, poetry, and what we love. Carlos has a generous open heart. When I first heard his music, I was astonished at the level of his gifts. The pieces he creates move the heart and lift the senses. I love the way he sets language, and it's been a joy to engage with him as we brainstorm and create. Our first official collaboration was "Holding Our Breath" for ACDA, but even before that, we had begun to correspond by email and explore the notion of creating together. I think he and I both love collaborating.

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Brian Newhouse: I attended a Wartburg Choir concert in 2019. They premiered a piece by composer Connor Koppin that I'd written the text for, and also sang Kyle's arrangement of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." So often you hear versions of that piece that are almost militaristic, but Kyle turned it on its head; he found a beauty in Luther's hymn tune that others miss and made it quietly passionate and totally fresh. I wrote a fan letter to him the next day and said, "Um, you don't know me, but…"

Kyle Pederson: Brian almost got it right. It was indeed the Wartburg concert in April of 2019. But it turns out it was I who wrote the fan letter to Brian, and I have

the Facebook message to prove it! The text he wrote about hands for Connor Koppin was really impactful... so I reached out to let him know. He sent a gracious response back and opened the door to a future collaboration by writing, "if you're ever interested to work with a lyricist on a choral piece, let me know..."

What was the last piece on which you worked together? Was it a commission? If so, from whom?

Powell: Our last collaboration was "Love Will Find A Way," which has just been released by Gentry Publications. Our collaboration began when he sent the lyrics to me, troubled by what he was hearing and seeing on the news. As I read his words, I found myself inspired by his sentiments. Steve's lyrics described where we were as a country, and where we find ourselves even now. His lyrics addressed the apparent problems while offering hope through acts of love. Somehow, amid all the divisiveness of our world, there are stories of people coming together, loving, and helping one another. The work was commissioned by The Metropolitan Youth Orchestra of New York's Nassau Chamber Chorale and was premiered in Jazz at Lincoln Center in May 2019.

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Runestad: "Earth Symphony," for chorus and orchestra, is our latest and most ambitious piece yet—a thirty-five-minute dramatic monologue from the voice of a post-Anthropocene Mother Earth. The work imagines Earth's hope for humanity, her discovery of its power, her ruination at its hands, her lament at its loss, and her recovery. This piece was commissioned by True Concord Voices & Orchestra and their conductor Eric Holtan and had its premiere in February 2022.

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Cordero: The last piece we worked on was "Holding Our Breath." We are currently working on a commission from the Mendelssohn Chorus of Philadelphia and Dominick DiOrio.

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Newhouse: Covid has jumbled the dates of the actual premieres of our commissions vs. commissions we've finished and are awaiting premieres vs. some speculative pieces we're hoping come to fruition. A glorious mess. But the most recent premiere was "First Cradle" (SSAA with cello and piano), about the exquisite bond between parents and newborns, and the bittersweet heartbreak of letting our children go.

Pederson: A glorious mess indeed! "First Cradle" was a commissioned project with Judy Sagen and the Minnesota Valley Women's Chorale. Brian had shared his beautiful text a few months earlier, and it came immediately to mind as Judy and I were talking about the kind of piece she envisioned for her choir. The pandemic postponed the premiere by a couple of years, but it was worth the wait! The most recent "full on" collaboration was the Genesis Prize piece, commissioned by ACDA, and premiered by Conspirare. That was an iterative process in which text and music influenced each other over the course of the collaboration, and where Brian and I were able to meet in person a few times in addition to phone/email exchanges.

For the composers: What do you look for in a text? What gets you excited about a text?

Powell: Often, I am inspired by texts that speak to my heart about the joys and struggles of life. Because of my studies in art song literature and the African American spiritual, I am especially drawn to symbolism and metaphorical texts that juxtapose nature with human experience. I find inspiration in texts that arouse a heart response as I read them. This emotional response is what serves as the impetus for and develops the mood, melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and form of the song as I compose.

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Runestad: At the first reading of a text, I need to feel the energy and emotional intention of the writer. It has to grab me right away at a superficial level, and then engage me the further I dig into its layers of meaning. I desire texts that are succinct, clear, and compelling in

voice and imagery, while leaving room for the music to paint some of the colors as well as elaborate on what the text introduces. Language with open vowels, especially at climactic moments, is crucial and I often work with my collaborator to achieve this. If there are too many details or there is too much "music" in the text itself, the pairing with sound can make the resulting art too busy.

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Cordero: Even though it sounds obvious, I like a text I can understand. I fall in love with texts that speak like we speak today when having a conversation or speaking over the phone with a loved one. I like texts that are short, direct, and vulnerable because I feel safe coming in and interacting with the text. I become a bridge to bring it to more people. I believe that our audience is not only that one that comes to the concert but is also everyone who comes in contact with your voice, and your voice is everything that we do!

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Pederson: To start, some texts just seem to present melodic or rhythmic ideas to me; I'll sit down at the piano to noodle on the text and a musical idea will emerge. I love when a text says something in a new way and paints the picture in a way that is fresh or evocative. Also, finding the internal rhymes (inside the phrases rather than at the ends of them) and figuring out a way to highlight those is a fun challenge. Brian's writing is full of interesting internal rhymes. I'm also drawn to texts that allow people of various backgrounds and experiences to enter in and find something meaningful. So, I often look for texts that can serve as a springboard for conversation.

How specific (or not) do you like your assignment to be?

Powell: I prefer that the commissioning organization provides specifics on the purpose of the work, the theme of the occasion or concert, mood, tempo, and general style. If they have a poem in mind, I will want to read it and determine if it is one through which I can find inspiration before agreeing to the commission.

Bock: I've written a few texts that have been set to music, and a few that have not. All of them have been poems that come from their own place without any assignment. I don't know if I could produce under an assignment/commission structure. I've never done it.

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Runestad: I will happily work within a general theme for a commission but prefer freedom in choosing the specific direction and text/poet. Not all texts can and should be set to music!

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Cordero: Hard question! I like to have specific details so I can be creative within my limits. A few years ago, when I was in college, I had a commission where they told me I could do whatever I wanted, and what I wanted was to cry. The piece I did was too difficult because I was doing things because I "could" instead of writing for the ensemble. When I failed on this first piece, I decided to write an "I-am-sorry-I-wrote-such-a-hard-piece piece" and that's how "Salve Regina" came to life! Then, I was writing for the people and not for a made-up set of choral tools.

Flanders: What a great question! I find that a general direction, theme, guidance, and sense of what the shared intentions are is helpful. But when directions get too specific, they can be limiting. For Carlos, he gets to consider many musical factors: instrumentation, how many singers, time, and whatever else the musical parameters are. For me, that information is also helpful as it can set tone. But for me, when a piece is coming fresh to the world, it's not about rendering it. It's about finding it! About exploring the territory from which the song emerges. Too much direction in the assignment can stunt the exploratory process.

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Newhouse: I like two things in a commission: One, crystal clarity on the approximate length of the piece, deadline, special occasion or commemoration, and of course as much as possible about who's singing it. I also like to inquire what the commissioner hopes the piece might accomplish, what effect it might have on the au-

dience and singers. Two, then I like a nice open playing field for my own creativity to run. That 50-50 blend of clarity and creativity is my sweet spot.

Pederson: Generally, I enjoy the musical flexibility to craft the kind of piece that the text might inspire without too many parameters. That was one of the especially fun aspects of the Genesis commission—its openness allowed the piece to become a bit more sprawling (8 min), cover three separate continents, two different languages, and several genres. But I've also had success on commissions with a very specific wish list. I agree with Brian that clarity around deadline, intended audience, intended choir, and intended impact is very helpful.

Describe your process of collaborating on a project.

Powell: My first collaboration, "The Promise Lives On," with lyricist Pamela Martin for Sing for the Cure, was composed between 2000 and 2001. My most recent collaboration, "Love Will Find A Way," occurred with Steve in 2018. For each of these and those in between, once the lyrics or poetry was provided, I was given the freedom to compose the song without further input until I submitted the first draft for review. So far, the lyricists have welcomed this arrangement, and it has made the process a smooth one.

Bock: I don't know of an easier collaboration experience than what I had with Rosephanye on "Love Will Find a Way." The text came out of an evening of watching annoying television "news" programs, which were really nothing more than two people yelling at each other about some topic and not listening to the other person at all. I thought "There has to be a better way for our society to deal with complex issues." Out of that came the text. In fact, it came very fast. Words were coming out of my head faster than my fingers could type. The entire thing was written in under an hour. I didn't have any plans for it, really. It was nothing more than my way of responding to the frustration that I was feeling.

After living with it for a few weeks, I showed it to our VP of Publications, Allan Petker. I asked him if he thought it was worth trying to get set to music. He thought it was. I asked him if he thought my idea of showing it to Rosephanye was crazy, and he said, "Absolutely not! She would be perfect!" I called her one afternoon and shared it with her. Within the first few minutes she was already telling me that she had some musical ideas running through her head. That's how this all started.

As far as the collaboration goes, it was actually very simple for me. I sent her the text and she set it. Now, she did ask if she could adjust and augment my words to make it work for the music that she was writing. Of course, I agreed. When the piece was done, she sent it to me to review. I literally had no notes for her. The places where she had changed/altered my text were done appropriately and thoughtfully to both what I had written and what she had composed. Most of my collaboration processes have had more back-and-forth with composers. "Love Will Find A Way" is the one that required no discussion or debate. It was so easy.

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Boss: First of all, Jake doesn't just "set my poems." That's never been how we work together. Instead, we start with an idea or a theme, and we bat it around over a series of phone calls, and then I go to work writing something custom for him, an original. What Jake wants from me is a living work of art that's responsive to his passions and mine, but also to the particular choir and instruments that will premiere it, the audience for it, even sometimes the other works that will be performed alongside it.

Our early discussions focus on the idea and how it should develop, what structure the overall piece will take, what impact we want the piece to have on listeners, how the choir might best be leveraged, and any literary or musical references we might want to be aware of. All of that discussion happens before I write a word, before he writes a note. A few weeks of gestation will go by, and I'll have an inspiration or think of a cool twist on our theme, and then we'll have another conversation or two. Soon enough I'm drafting something, but I won't usually let him see it till I've over-written it, given

him lots of stuff to respond to. I share it. He sits with it for a while...

Then he sends me a markup and calls me to walk through his reactions. This conversation is usually a give-and-take. By now I've developed a stronger vision of the piece than Jake has, because I've been in the creative process of it, so Jake usually has to talk me through that, and in the process, either my vision will change or he will begin to embrace it, or he'll start having new ideas that will take it in another direction entirely…or some combination of all of that. In the weeks to follow I'll produce another draft, using what I've learned. I still want to surprise him with something fresh that takes our vision to the next level, but by now I'm also aware of his evolving vision and I want to respond to where his passions are. Ideally, we're equally excited about the finished piece, which might be another three or four (sometimes twice that many) drafts away yet. Our process of exchange continues, draft after draft, until we're equally excited.

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Cordero: Our collaboration process is one of my favorites because it includes almost everything but writing the text and music. Julie and I have these wonderful calls where we talk about art, life, and how we are doing through the challenges of life. We create connections with poems, books, movies, music, and anything we can think about. We live in this brainstorm-like hurricane of ideas where I always end up feeling better and renewed. Our process allows for space for honesty and mistakes, for laughter and struggles. It also allows for me to comment on words and for her to comment on music, which is always fun to see each other's perspectives.

Flanders: Yes, it's really about entering the unknown together and exploring the uncertainties that make a piece interesting. What is extraordinary in working with Carlos is how often I will send him notes of what I am thinking about or come to a call with a map of possibilities, and he will show me his own journal of exploration and we have been absolutely synchronized and coincident in our journeys. It's like a waking dream to find a piece together. Also, Carlos has an incredible ability to structure and hold a powerful architecture of elements in place. I so appreciate the way he organizes the chaos we generate into a kind of divine coherence and then he flows that into musical beauty and meaning.

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Newhouse: Kyle calls with a "Hey, are you interested…" request, and because he's endlessly inventive as a composer and so generous about our process, the answer's always yes. He typically has all the details of the assignment I describe above, then we set a tentative deadline for my first draft. My goal as a writer is to give him something that sparks the strongest and most immediate musical response—the writer works for the composer, not the other way 'round. As for my own process, I take all the elements of the commission into a kind of creative cave in my brain; I invite my own soul and heart in as well. Then I start moving my pen across the page, letting it run and run and run. On average I'll have thirty to forty pages of pre-writing that will ultimately come down to three to four stanzas of finished text. That sounds crazy in terms of Return-on-Investment, I know, but this is the part of the process that I love the most, the joy of creation.

Pederson: After the initial discussion that Brian describes, he squirrels away and produces some magic. With the resulting text, I'll noodle on the piano and see what musical ideas emerge. I'll share those ideas with Brian, because often that initial music will prompt some additions/deletions/edits in the text. The music and text end up influencing each other as we keep working. Brian is incredibly generous with his time. It's a luxury to work with him.

For the poets: Once you have finished a text, are you willing/able to adjust it for the needs of the composition?

Bock: Yes. As a publisher, I know that you have to make the finished publication the best that it can possibly be, and there are times where the text has to be adjusted to fit what the composer is writing. There's obviously a back-and-forth in that process. In my case,

the words always come before the music. That means that it's being created in a vacuum that only works with itself. Once the music gets added, the elements have to move around to make the end product work. I've had texts that are set exactly as I wrote them with no alteration, and I've had others (like "Love Will Find A Way") where additional work was needed to get it right as a choral piece. If you're not willing to let your words be adjusted for what the music is asking/needing, then the published piece will be less than it should be. I'm more interested in getting it right for the music than making sure that the integrity of my original poem is maintained.

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Boss: Once the final draft of the text is complete, Jake starts working out the music. This is when we fine-tune stuff—a single word's syllable count, or a particular vowel that doesn't chorus well. He doesn't change a thing unless I consent, and now and then I'll insist on a choice he has to tangle creatively with, or we'll haggle over a definition, or puzzle out a phrase together. It takes a lot of trust and mutual respect to work this way, but it's immensely satisfying.

We're collaborating in the truest sense of the term: toiling together. What we make we make up whole-cloth, original. As a result, we're passionate about every word. The finished piece is a mutual expression, not just his interpretation of something I wrote. That's what's exciting about working with Jake, and why, after nine projects together, I'm ready for more.

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Flanders: I trust Carlos so much. I am beyond fortunate to have him collaborating with me in the textual process. I tend to deluge him with text and then he mines the onslaught for distillates, which then shape into piece. We think a lot also in terms of what frames a piece or ways that entering and leaving the experience of the piece can also be meaningful for the audience. In "Holding Our Breath" we explored a lot about breath and used it as an element of frame.

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Newhouse: Absolutely. That's actually part of the fun! The challenge when Kyle asks for three extra syllables here, or two less there, or a whole new final line… Again, my job is to give him something that rocks his composer-world. Though you didn't ask this, I've found, with Kyle, that collaboration works both ways: he once showed me an early draft of a piece, and I thought one particular line of text wanted much bigger music; he took that to heart, re-wrote it, and it became the exciting climax.

Finally, what would you like conductors to know about the commissioning process?

Powell: I consider composition to be very personal and a craft that requires a great investment of time, heart, intellect, skill, and energy. The more information a conductor provides relative to purpose, message, and mood, the more informed the process will be for me. I don't accept open-ended commission requests that begin and end with statements like "I want a fast, up-tempo song" or "a slow song like your song (title)." Some composers are fine with such requests; but for me, requests that provide no direction for messaging, storytelling, or expression imply that the requestor has not given serious thought to the commission or its purpose. For me, there must be a reason to compose or a message that the commissioner feels compelled to share with their singers and audience. Otherwise, there is no source of inspiration for me.

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Runestad: Commissioning a poet in addition to a composer is an important and compelling way to make a relevant artistic statement. Older texts have a place, but we can't always live in the past, and custom-made texts are often better suited to musical settings. The poet should be paid a fair fee for their work and should be involved in the entire process, just like the composer. The poet, composer, and conductor team should engage in a trusting relationship before the collaboration, with an understanding of roles and expectations, to make sure they work well together. This trust is crucial for the success of the project.

Boss: None of the texts I've written for Jake have ever landed in one of my poetry collections. That's because my texts for choral setting don't really operate well as poems. I don't think of them as poems. They don't respond to the demands a poetry reader makes of poems. A text's responsibilities are different. So that's another reason I prefer to write custom for Jake. His needs aren't satisfied using the methods I was trained to use. I've had to learn a very different way of writing.

I've come to believe that composers compromise a great deal when they adapt most poems, because most poems weren't made to be sung. (Leave aside for a moment that I also feel composers do a disservice to art when they source poems from dead writers as opposed to living ones.) I dream of a day when composers are working directly with poets as a general rule to create living works of art that are of the moment, and I've already put myself at the service of poets and composers looking for guidance.

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Cordero: People need more communication and time. The creative process is best when all the parties involved are available and willing to be there for each other. I know we are all going through difficult moments in life, but we forget to mean it when we ask "how are you?" or to reply to an email sent weeks ago. Musicians can forget that they are humans first. We also need to break the stigma of using living poets. There is a terrible unspoken rule in the composition world: don't use copyrighted poems, be careful with living poets because it will be a pain to get permissions. It can be difficult sometimes, but that's not always true and some of my best pieces have come from living poets! If not, we will continue to have all the Teasdale and Rosetti and not much of the Flanders of the world, and I don't want that unbalanced future for our new choral music scene.

Flanders: I come from a background in theater where the text and music are often created in a dynamic back-and-forth process of artists sparking and inspiring one another. This is the process by which Carlos and I create. The work in theater, at its best, is very exciting. The best choral commissions are also very exciting. Commissioning can be culture-changing and audience-attracting. Living poets can speak meaningfully into the heart of our times. I agree with Carlos that to expand the commissioning process to include poets is a valuable artistic choice. The times we live in are volatile and rapidly changing. New Choral Music is a powerful form of art with a tremendous capacity to speak into the present and shape the future. Conductors lead this process with their beautiful choices.

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Newhouse: How collaborative and joyful this can be! And of course, the result is a piece tailored for them. I've heard some of the headaches that composers have had with clearing the rights from published poets (living and deceased) to set their work. From my point of view, life's too short to be difficult about these things. We all want the new work a.) to be absolutely superb; and b.) to be meaningful for the conductor, the choir and the audience; and c.) to have a long life afterward so other choirs want to sing it. Let's have some fun making it together.

Pederson: There are so many variables for conductors to consider when commissioning a piece. I've certainly heard horror stories—it's sometimes remarkable to me how resilient conductors are and how committed the choral world is to commissioning new music. And, of course, all of us composers and lyricists are incredibly grateful for that resilience and dedication to new music.

For conductors who haven't had a chance to commission a new work (whether music or text), it really can be a wonderful experience to reach out to composers/lyricists about your vision. There are so many composers eager to chat with you and help bring that vision to reality. CJ