

Reflections on Conductors, Composers, and Commissions

by Andrew Crane

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Over the course of the past two decades as a full-time director of choral activities (three at the high school level and eighteen at the university level), I've had the opportunity to collaborate with numerous composers on commissions, premieres, and, by virtue of my choral series with Walton Music, to assist composers in getting works published. The ACDA Standing Committee for Composition Initiatives invited me to share about my experiences with choral composition, and I suppose the best place to start is the "why." Why, as a *conductor*, do I spend a good deal of time engaging with living *composers* of choral music? For several reasons:

1) I take great joy in bringing exposure to new works that I really believe in. I love seeing a wonderful new piece spread organically to other choirs and conductors. This brings me the same kind of pride that I feel when a choir under my direction sings well in performance.

2) Several years ago, a conductor who was somewhat familiar with my work told me that I preferred "repertoire off the beaten path." His point was that I seemed more drawn to new/unknown compositions rather than choosing simply from what was popular that year. Upon some reflection, I decided that he was probably right. I'm not completely sure why this is the case, but I do believe repertoire selection is just as much a part

of the creative process as is the act of rehearsing and conducting in performance. In a certain way I feel like I'm somehow expressing my own creativity by finding new and/or unfamiliar works.

3) The experience of a premiere, when it really "hits," can be exciting for conductor, choir, and audience alike. There's something magical about being part of a collaborative process that gives life to new art.

Those are the "whys." The "what" and the "how" are a little more complicated, and perhaps not without some controversy. I'll admit that these opinions are solely my own, and they come from a lot of trial and error. Not all of my experiences with composers and commissions have been wildly successful—likely because of some fault of mine, not the composers'—but here are some topics to consider.

Cold-Call Solicitations

Many composers send perusal scores to conductors without being invited to do so. I call this "cold calling." Not every conductor loves this, but I am actually a big fan of it. If you are a conductor, I encourage you to give all of these pieces a close look! The composer has taken the time to reach out to you; you should take the time to look at their works. I maintain a dedicated email

folder specifically for these submissions. Sometimes it takes me a full calendar year before I get around to perusing them, but I always do. NOTE: Since opinions can vary regarding these kinds of solicitations, composers would do well to first request a conductor's permission to send new works.

To the composers, here are a few bits of advice. 1) Please send these submissions over email (preferred) or snail mail, not direct messages over social media. 2) Please do not get angry or frustrated if we don't respond immediately or don't program your work; there are so many great pieces out there, and it's not reasonable to expect that we can give voice to everything that comes across our desks. 3) Sometimes composers will send me a score out of the blue and ask me for "my honest opinion" about it, on the premise of wanting to improve their skills; but after I take the time to give my constructive feedback, I don't hear from that composer again, which makes me wonder why they asked for suggestions in the first place. NOTE: this is certainly not an open invitation for composers to seek "free composition lessons" from their conductor colleagues; composers can ask for input but should not expect or demand it.

Form Relationships

When I find a piece that I really believe in and love, I almost always reach out to the composer, even if I don't know them at all. Composers can offer great insights into their own music. Also, if your "taste" in repertoire seems to resonate with the writing style of a particular composer, it's likely that that composer has written other pieces that you and your choir will enjoy. I have formed wonderful relationships with composers over the years, both in the United States and abroad, simply by championing their music.

The Commissioning Process

As the conductor of the choir for whom the commission is being written, I personally want to be quite involved in the work's creation, and I'm up front about this with the composer from the beginning. Having gone through this process a number of times now, I've

learned that I like to engage with composers who are open to collaboration. The simple truth is that commissions are expensive and can stretch the budgets of most choral programs. Because of this, I feel it's a conductor's responsibility to collaborate with the composer in order to ensure a successful experience and a solid return on investment. Here are some ways that I have consulted with composers in the past when it comes to commissions:

- Length of work.
- Key center(s) of work: I have certain keys that really "sing" well with my choirs, particularly in unaccompanied music.
- Repetitions of thematic material: For example, in an ABA' work, I'm always thinking about how different the A' section is when compared to the A section. I've found that "very different" and "nearly identical" are ideal scenarios. A repeat of the original thematic material that is "only slightly different" can be difficult for the choir, especially if the piece will be sung from memory.
- Works in foreign languages: In the case of an unfamiliar (to the choir) foreign language, can the text be somehow passed around in the individual voice parts, such that the entire choir doesn't have to learn the entirety of the foreign text? This will save time in the learning process.
- Range, tessitura, divisi: What will be appropriate for this particular choir, in this particular year?
- The ending of the piece: Never underestimate the importance of the last several measures of a choral work. I make sure I tell the composer how I'd like the ending to sound, whether a "button," a "slow burnout," "epic," etc.
- Style/form: If the commission is for an original work and not an arrangement, how important is *melody* to you as a conductor? Or are you looking for more of an atmospheric soundscape? Is there a clear formal struc-

ture, or is it more through-composed? What are some adjectives that describe the type of music you are hoping to hear? Possible examples: jagged, sweet, raucous, understated, dazzling, etc.

- **Influences:** Are there other pieces by well-known composers that “sound like” the piece you are hoping to receive? Feel free to name those compositions. Not that you’re looking for a plagiarism of the other work, but this exercise can be helpful in giving the composer an idea of the kind of piece that will speak to you and your choir.

These are all things that I discuss with the composer *before* they start putting pencil to paper. After this initial consultation, I tend to back off and give the composer space to create without my interference. At some point in the process, the composer will send me a sketch of early ideas, or maybe even a full first draft. I’ll make some comments and then we go back and forth a little bit. Sometimes this takes one or two passes only, sometimes it’s more involved. This depends on the relationship that I have with the composer... which leads me to my next point.

The Composer’s Muse vs. The Conductor’s Needs

I really don’t have any skills as a composer. I am a decent “evaluator” of compositions, but I can’t actually do the work. So I don’t understand what it’s like for a composer to receive artistic inspiration or how exactly they come about their compositional ideas. I imagine the process is different for every composer. Still, there is an alchemy there that must be respected and allowed to flourish, so speaking into a composer’s process must be done carefully. The more a conductor comes with musical “demands,” the less a composer may feel that The Muse is able to effectively speak through them. Some composers love clear parameters and limits, but others may feel they lose a bit of artistic freedom and space within which to create an original work of art each time the commissioner adds a layer of specificity to what they “want.”

On the other hand, I do think composers should be

open to conductors’ suggestions. Oftentimes a conductor will have practical ideas for small improvements that will ultimately make the composition stronger, more accessible, and more apt to receive repeat performances. Everybody wins in this scenario. The better I know a composer, both on a personal and a musical level, the better I am able to navigate this balance.

My best advice is to be transparent and open with the composer at the time of commissioning. I learned this lesson the hard way, when a composer delivered a brand-new piece to me which had some wonderful moments but still needed a little tweaking. I asked if he might consider a few specific changes, and the composer seemed quite offended and rejected my request out of hand. I fault myself for this; I had not discussed my hope for a collaborative approach with the composer beforehand. Had he known that, he would have had a chance to say, “No thanks, I don’t work that way,” and I would have been better prepared.

Final Thoughts

It’s always rewarding to involve the composer in the rehearsal process as you approach the premiere. Zoom calls, in-person visits, pre-recorded content created by the composer—these are all great. Make sure you pay the composer for this extra work, unless you’ve already agreed to such “extras” in the commissioning contract.

If you have the means to bring the composer out to the premiere, do so. It’s such a fabulous experience for composer, choir, audience, and conductor alike. There’s nothing like it. Take the composer out to dinner, get to know them, let the choir members engage with them. This makes the experience all the richer. Commissioning and premiering new choral music is worth it! It keeps composers working; and it stretches you as a musician and a conductor; and it keeps our art form growing and thriving. 