

The Royal Canadian College of Organists
Le Collège royal canadien des organistes

LET'S COMMISSION A WORK!

by

William Wright

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The following thoughts are gathered together in response to a request from the R.C.C.O. They are by no means definitive, but reflect the kinds of experience I have met.

If you are a little nervous about commissioning a work for the first time, take heart. Most composers are absolutely delighted to be approached by a novice, because this indicates to them an increasing awareness of their work and a widening interest in the personal link between composer and performer.

From the first, be frank. It lets the composer see that you are serious about his/her work and does not give him/her the feeling that you will be wasting time. Before approaching a composer, however, you will need to clarify in your own mind exactly what it is you want. This clear picture will assist greatly in avoiding misunderstandings which can occur even when both parties have respect for each other and the project.

When I first thought about commissioning a work I decided that I needed to know who in Canada was writing. I went to the Canadian Music Centre and listened to tapes and looked at scores. I learned who would likely be writing in the genre I wished to commission. Everyone was very helpful and encouraging. It was not hard to find people whom I might approach; it was harder to make one choice among many! I kept in mind a first, second and third choice. It is possible that a composer already has more work than he can handle in the coming year or two, and may have to turn down or postpone works for that reason. This is fine if you have so much time at your disposal, but be ready with a second option if your first request is denied. Also, do not feel embarrassed at a refusal; chances are that a composer feels even more frustrated at turning down a request! I have had only three denials. One was with the reason that the composer was doing more experimental work than I was willing to accept, (in terms of instrumentation) and the other two simply had more work than they could handle. One actually sent me a motet *gratis* three years later!

Let us assume that you are commissioning a work for choir. Later I will mention, briefly, commissioning a work for organ. The first thing to think about is that of text. You will already have in mind an occasion when the new work will be performed. You may wish to find a text, or you may wish to leave it up to the composer. Be prepared to discuss text thoroughly with the composer before settling on it. If you leave it up to the composer, make it clear that you have to approve the text before a note is set to music! Otherwise you run a risk of having a text which might be inappropriate for your particular setting.

If you feel that you would like to assemble a text, do so sparingly. Words put to music need much more time for declamation than when read at your desk. Make sure that the text is not under any copyright restrictions. The text will have some note about this at the front of the volume. If the writer is alive or recently deceased you are under obligation to find out who holds the copyright and to write asking for permission to use the text. This can be given freely, or it might come with a high price tag. If you allow yourself several months to get this straightened out, you need not panic. If the writer has been dead for more than fifty years, then the work is likely in the public domain, and can be used, unless you are using an edited version. Biblical texts, of course, present no problems. That is with one exception. I would caution against yet another setting of a psalm, since there are so many fine settings of most of the psalms. In fact, publishers are so overwhelmed with composers setting psalms that they tend to turn down any psalm setting for publication unless it is by an outstanding composer. So pick a text that has some uniqueness for your situation.

Secondly, know the resources of your group. Have a list of well-known composers whose work your choir performs regularly and with excellence, and include as many twentieth century composers in this list as you can. This will give the composer you approach some idea of the capabilities of your choir.

Give vocal ranges of each section and be realistic. If your tenors can just manage an E-flat, then give the vocal range limit as D: it often happens that composers want your singers to do just a little bit more than you have suggested. However, if you are clear with your definitions, problems need not arise. Don't forget to mention whether or not each voice can split into two sections; if you have only one alto you don't need a work with divisi alto.

Finally, decide on the length of the work in minutes. If you have not already done so, you should time (with a stop-watch) several of your favourites motets. You might be surprised at how long some of them are!

Once you have decided on the length, the difficulty level, the voice ranges of your singers, and the text, you are in a position to approach a composer. Be prepared to discuss fees immediately. The Canadian League of Composers has a fee schedule to which most composers refer. It can give both of you a good idea of the approximate cost of a work. But make sure you have a contract, in writing, with the final cost to you stated; also include every point which is a source of concern to you. It may be that you can obtain municipal or provincial assistance for this commission. Even private funding may be possible. Your composer will be able to tell you some of the sources, and you will have to explore others yourself.

Be clear in your contract what sort of copy the composer is expected to deliver to you. If you do not wish a hand written copy (and that is unusual these days) then specify that you would like a copy in a form produced by Finale or Sibelius or the equivalent. Ask, too, whether the score will include a piano reduction for your accompanist. This may be important for you.

Remember that you are paying the composer to write a work which you will perform but not own. You may wish to stipulate that you have exclusive rights to the first performance of that work, or that your group alone be permitted to perform the work in its first season. Since a composer is highly interested in having each new work receive as much attention as possible, it may be that this second request is less sympathetically received, unless you intend to perform the work several times for a larger public. Make sure, however, that you have written assurance that you will be the first group to receive copies of the work and to perform the work..

You may want to specify that you have the right to possess all copies of the music used in that first performance. There is nothing more distressing than to find yourself without a single copy of the music you have paid to have created; (this happened to me once - but only once).

You should also discuss with the composer whether or not he will expect fees in the future each time the work is performed. Some composers are lenient about this, and some strict. At any rate, the fee is usually minimal. Most professional composers are members of SOCAN, ASCAP, BMI or some other royalty-paying organization which collects fees from performing and recording groups and distributes them to composers. If your group regularly performs works by contemporary composers, you should register with SOCAN (for a small annual fee).

Decide on a completion date far in advance of the actual performance. You know how much time your choir needs to learn a work of moderate difficulty, or more. Double this and add several weeks in case there are copying problems. In general, you would do well to have the music in your hands before the start of the season in which you wish to perform the work.

If you wish the work to be accompanied by organ, have the composer get to know your instrument. Specify the number of manuals and whether there be pedal. I once commissioned a work for choir and positive organ and was horrified to find a pedal part. The composer remarked that he had just thrown that

in *gratis*; to round off the work, so to speak! Be prepared to go over the registrations with the composer after the work is finished.

Perhaps you wish your choral work to be accompanied by other instruments. Be absolutely clear as to what those instruments are. If you say "choir and strings" and you are planning to hire a string quartet, you may find yourself with an extra part for a double bass and divisi violas. The same is true for brass instruments. Brass quartets, for example, can be made up in a couple of ways.

If you plan to commission a work for organ solo, this becomes a much more personal thing. Perhaps the most specific detail is that you commission a work which suits your own level of competency. Make sure that the composer is aware of your technical skill by giving him a list of your repertoire. Be prepared to play through the piece as soon as you receive it, and discuss any details which may need modification for you. (Perhaps a stretch is too great for your hand). Make sure that the composer knows the compass of the manuals and pedals and be prepared to spend time discussing registration at the instrument. I was rather distraught once by having a composer attend a CBC taping session of a new work in which no colour indications had been written, only dynamics. The composer would rush up to me and say, "I want more woodwinds, here, more piccolo..." I had to re-register the work while I was taping it. That, I should add, was not one of my commissions.

I hope that this article indicates some of the pitfalls to be avoided in commissioning a work.. Do not let it daunt you. You may even want to request that the name of your choir be included if the work is printed. Most composers do that anyway.

In general, working with composers has been a happy and instructive experience for me. I am always impressed with the willingness of all to put themselves out in order to make sure this joint project is a success. When I have had difficulties I have found them to occur because I did not foresee the responsibilities of both parties to agree on a common concept and include these in a written contract. Once that bond is sealed, you can enjoy being part of a cultural tradition as old as music itself.

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RESOURCES

CANADIAN MUSIC CENTRE <http://www.musiccentre.ca>

Ontario Region

Chalmers House
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British Columbia Region

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Regional Director: Colin Miles colin@musiccentre.ca
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Prairie Region

Violet Archer Library
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University of Calgary
2500 University Dr. N.W.
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Regional Director: John Reid prairie@musiccentre.ca
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Région du Québec

416, rue McGill
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Atlantic Region

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CANADIAN LEAGUE OF COMPOSERS <http://www.clc-lcc.ca>

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