

## NEW MUSIC COMMISSIONS

By Philip Brunelle

Commissioning music is a marvelous experience - the thrill of having something written especially for you is like ordering your own tailored ensemble of clothes. In all of life's musical presentations, there is nothing that can compare with the joy of presenting a commissioned work. In the specific instance of an AGO Chapter, the "world premiere" of a piece commissioned from a local (and perhaps overlooked) composer can stir interest and provide an incomparable source of enthusiasm for both the chapter members and the community at large. Why, then, is not more music commissioned?

There are several misconceptions about commissioning new music that prevent many people from considering it as a viable option. First, there is the matter of money. Many people believe that all commissions cost tons of money, and that the small amount they have to offer would not be acceptable. **THIS IS NOT TRUE.** The range in pay scale for a commission can vary from a few dollars to many thousands. The commissions we most frequently hear about are the large symphonic and operatic commissions - works that engage a composer in months (and even years) of activity. Commissions within reach of a chapter would not normally be of such scope. Composers are anxious to write, and will welcome the opportunity to create a piece for which there is a "certain market," taking into account the needs and resources of the patron. Of course, a well-established composer will have a more settled idea about what should be charged, but generally speaking, the fee is likely to be proportionate to the composer's reputation in the music world.

Another misconception regarding commissions is that the commissioning body has no say in the matter of what will be written. **THIS IS NOT TRUE.** Once you have agreed upon a composer (this includes knowing the style of music that composer writes and having some idea of what you want the composer to create), talk with the composer about your idea. Discuss the fee you can pay (many composers use a fee scale based on each minute of music composed), and whether or not the cost of copying is the responsibility of the composer or the commissioner. In some instances the commission fee includes the copy costs, while other times this is a separate item. Explain the occasion prompting the work (the chapter's anniversary, honoring a special member, etc.), ideas on the text, the size of the performing forces (choir a cappella, or choir with instruments and which ones, etc.). This kind of information is helpful to composers and gives them the guidelines needed to think about the work. It may be that you are not sure about some of these details and will want the composer's advice - that is fine. Remember, as the commissioner, you are in the driver's seat: make sure you and the composer understand each other. This is simple communication, but immensely important. Once you have this understanding, the composer can go to work.

Be sure that the composer hears your choir or the performer(s) for which he/she is writing. This may not always be possible, and a tape may have to suffice, but it is most important. Only in this way can the composer judge the level of accomplishment of your group, hear its strengths, and capitalize on them. An overly difficult piece, or one that highlights the weakest points of its

intended performers, will do nothing to advance the reputation of either the composer or the chapter.

Agree on a date for delivery. The composer may want to go over the work with you prior to submitting it in final form to get your opinion - some do, some don't. Some are very prompt with their work, some are a bit tardy, and some are horribly late. Be prepared! With the arrival of the commission, you must determine how you are going to get copies to the performers. In some instances, you need only decide whether the manuscript is legible enough to be copied as is, while sometimes the music will have to be given to a third party for computer setting. If there is any question about its legibility (and time to rehearse is always limited), it is highly recommended that you have the work printed via a computer music notation program.

Now you are ready to rehearse the work. If at all possible, get the composer's thoughts on the work before you begin; perhaps the two of you can play it through together. If this isn't possible, communication by phone or letter is essential. Rehearsals can now begin! If your group has never been involved in a premiere before, help them to sense the uniqueness and thrill of the occasion; many volunteers have trouble seeing what the outcome will be and need your support . . . and not all of the notes may be learned at the first rehearsal! If the composer lives in town and wants to attend rehearsals, you may want to have several weeks with the new material alone before inviting your special guest - that way you can get some of the notechasing taken care of, and the composer can listen to interpretive things rather than wayward pitches.

Finally, the premiere is here! Make it a thrilling moment - do all you can to involve the congregation or audience in the sense of the occasion. If the composer is in attendance, welcome him or her and, if you desire, have the composer say a few words. If it is an anthem for a service, let me make a suggestion: immediately after the service, have the choir return to the loft, and invite the congregation to remain for a second hearing. We all know that it takes more than one hearing for us to grasp a new thing - and how true this is for the audience. It makes for a welcome beginning in the life of a new work: you have experienced one of life's musical riches!

You may not want to coordinate a mass commissioning project like the one described here, but this story may give you ideas about how to start your own chapter commission. This is the sort of project that benefits from brainstorming with the members of the executive or program committee - once the concept takes hold, you will be surprised by the range of ideas that will be unleashed!

In 1980, when the AGO held its National Convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul, I suggested having each church in the immediate area, large and small, commission an anthem to be performed in its own service on the Sunday preceding the Convention. We decided on a fee of \$300 - a modest amount that we felt each interested church could raise, one that would not be prohibitive for any church choir. It was our plan to pay each composer \$200 and use the remaining \$100 to copy each of the commissioned anthems and publish them as a bound set - each choir receiving a copy of the anthology for every choir member.

We wrote to all the composers residing in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area (the Minnesota Composers Forum helped us to compile an excellent list). The commission project was explained to them - the occasion that prompted the project, the modest amount of the commission (which would be the same for all), the printing of the anthology, and that after the premiere each composer was free to have the anthem published in octavo if a publisher could be found. The response was overwhelming - more than 40 composers expressed a desire to be included.

Twenty-nine churches ultimately participated in the project, representing small congregations as well as downtown cathedrals. The money was raised by private donations, by bake sales, by car washes . . . a host of ways that all helped the choir members become part of the commissioning process.

The American Composers Forum, based in St. Paul, Minnesota has developed a helpful tool kit for anyone wishing to commission a composer or initiate a composer residency. The Forum has broad experience working with composers of all musical styles and genres, and welcomes inquiries for assistance and guidance. The tool kit is available through their website at <[www.composersforum.org](http://www.composersforum.org)>. You may also request a copy by calling them at 651-228-1407, or writing to the American Composers Forum, 332 Minnesota Street, Suite E-145, St. Paul, MN 55101.

The New York-based organization “Meet the Composer” makes available a useful pamphlet called “Commissioning Music: A Basic Guide” that you may find helpful in initiating your own commissioning project. You can download this free document at <[www.meetthecomposer.org](http://www.meetthecomposer.org)> or request copies of this free pamphlet from Meet the Composer, 90 John Street, Suite 312, New York, NY 10038 (212-645-6949).

I hope this information will inspire and encourage you to attempt your own chapter commission. With a little care and the understanding that it need not be an overwhelming project, the rewards for your chapter (and the composer) can be tremendous.

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