

Career Development 101

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As a student, my teachers taught me how to write effective music, but for the most part, I had to learn the business of composition the hard way. Following are a few practical suggestions and insights that I wish I had learned much earlier. I hope they will help young composers as they begin to enter the professional world of composition.

Who to Write For

If you want your music to be performed, then write music for those individuals or ensembles that are most likely to perform your music. Take a look around you. Write for a church choir, community wind ensemble, the best trumpet player from school, your pianist friend who lives in NYC, an ensemble at your school (or alma mater) or a former teacher or a colleague. In return, you will get multiple rehearsals and an adequate performance that you can record and then shop to others. For those interested in computer or commercial music, add to this list a local video production company, advertising agencies, local radio/television stations, recording studios and art galleries. You will develop relationships with performers, directors and producers that have a web of connections into which you can tap. Members of your community will come to know your work and will support your activities in the future. By writing for those around you and those you know, you will gain experience, make contacts, develop an audience and form valuable relationships.

What to Write

From a marketing perspective, it is wise to create a product that fills a niche, and to maximize the potential shelf-life of that product. So ask your performer/commissioner what holes they have in their repertoire. Perhaps you are writing for a trumpet choir and the director says, "There really aren't any good one-minute encores for this ensemble." Then you have struck gold! Write a good one-minute encore, and it is more likely to be picked up by other groups, performed widely and published. Tip: I have recently become aware (through a colleague) that there is a lucrative market for "good" music for intermediate and beginning musicians and ensembles.

Presenting Your Music

If the score doesn't look professional, it will be assumed the music isn't either. Create a score and parts that are user-friendly. Include descriptive adjectives, measure numbers (at least for each staff), rehearsal letters and appropriate directions for a performance. When printing, use heavier paper stock to eliminate bleed-through on double-sided pages and use cardstock for the cover page and back or use a laminated cover and back. Make sure the binding allows for easy page turns and make sure the parts have page turns in appropriate places (not in the middle of a run!) and appropriate cues. If using a notation

program, use a quality printer. For parts, you can copy onto 11x17 sheets, folded in half to create 8 1/2 x 11 booklets. Scores printed on legal paper can be enlarged to 11x17 (121%). Scores should include the following sections in the front: “Program Note,” “Performance Notes,” and “About the Composer” with your contact information. It is very important that people can contact you easily.

Reward Performers

Thank your performers with a card, a box of chocolate, a bottle of wine or a dinner. Let them know you appreciate them and they will be willing to help you in the future. If they feel appreciated, they will be more likely to perform your music again, may share the music with other musicians and may even commission a work. Even if they did not render a stellar performance, it is simply bad form to criticize the people who took the time and effort to perform your piece. The poor performance might actually be partially your fault (score and parts not delivered on time, technical demands beyond the capability of the performer, unclear part, etc.) or the performer may not be well.

Publicity /Audience Development

Have a mailing/email sign-up list at every performance where it is feasible and ask those attending to sign it. Send announcements of your concerts, or other concerts of interest to those on your list. If your piece appears on a group’s concert, then see if you can get their mailing list for use in the future. When you send out notices, perhaps include other news so that it is a document people will view as a source of valuable information. Well in advance of a concert, send a press release to media outlets such as radio, internet, television and print publications. Most have an “arts calendar” listing. Here are other ideas: Offer to appear on radio or television shows; give a pre-concert talk at area colleges or at the hall; give some tickets away on the air; offer to speak at local club meetings; start your own new music group and/or ensemble; get to know all directors and performers in your area; start a new music newsletter; identify local arts/music reporters and establish a relationship; have works performed on public access stations; write music reviews for the local paper; send recordings to the local public radio or classical music station for broadcast; send flyers to local school directors; give a memorable reception; and send any commercial CDs to appropriate outlets for review. Follow up on every contact you make. Persistence pays off!

Get A Good Recording of Your Piece.

Don’t rely on “live” recordings, particularly of large ensemble works. See if you can schedule a recording session during a normal rehearsal time, perhaps after the concert, so that you can get the best recording possible. Then have it burned onto several CDs with professional labeling. Include the names of the performers (so future performers will know you will publicize them if they record your work) as well as contact information.

Professional Marketing Tools

Unless you are a superstar, you must present yourself and your work in a professional manner. So before you can think of soliciting commissions or performances, assemble a professional portfolio. You need professional looking scores and a demo CD that represents your best work. Other handy business tools include business cards, a readily available biography, works list, discography, artistic statement and web site which include the former plus sound files, sample score pages, links to commercially available products, upcoming events, links to publishers, ordering information and contact information. Assemble your portfolio in a way that says to the client, "I am a professional."

Develop and Retain Professional Contacts

Make a list of all area musical professionals, and introduce yourself to each one. Artist colonies, music festivals, summer composition programs, concerts and conferences are all wonderful places to make contacts outside of your immediate area.

Attend instrumental/vocal/conducting conferences as well. For example, if you are interested in writing for flute or have written for flute, go to a National Flute Association conference and shop yourself. You will have an opportunity to meet some of the best flutists in the country, and hear several new works for flute. Have several copies of your flute works to distribute. Visit the display area where you can make connections with publishers of flute music. Many will review your work there at the conference. Attend performances and introduce yourself to musicians you think might enjoy your music. If it is around mealtime, hang around. They might ask you to join them for dinner, and if not, why not ask them?

If you admire a living composer, contact them and see if you can get a lesson. What is the worst he or she can say? How else will he or she come to know your music?

Once you have established a relationship, keep in contact.

Disseminate your work

Using your newly established network, send out your music and follow through. If you met a flutist at a conference who told you, "I'd like to hear your work," then send it to him or her. Your goal is to get your music into the hands of directors and performers. Answer calls for scores in the AMC newsletter and elsewhere, submit scores to appropriate new music ensembles (see the AMC publication *Contemporary Music Ensembles: A Directory*), send scores to friends who have connections and send scores to leading professionals. Follow through a few weeks later by asking if they received the materials, and whether they have had an opportunity to listen to your work. If you are a young composer you might ask what advice they might have for you. Your goal is to

follow through and provide them with an enjoyable experience. Never give anyone a reason to be irritated with you.

Valuable Resources

As most know, a wealth of resources awaits composers on the web – everything from grants, calls for scores, new music sound files, interviews, biographical information, composer catalogues, helpful copyright and publishing articles and commissioning opportunities. If you haven't already taken advantage of the Internet, start by checking out these sites and their many links: music-usa.org/nacusa, amc.net (a gold-mine), composersforum.org, meetthecomposer.org, nyfa.org, societyofcomposers.org, ascap.com, bmi.com and under.org/cpcc.

Enter Select Competitions

Send your works to every legitimate competition you can and then forget that you ever sent the package. It does you no good to fixate on the outcome. Send your materials and then let it go. Realize that every competition is a crap-shoot. If you win, it doesn't mean your piece was the best (each of three judges may have ranked a different piece as #1 and #2, but your piece was #3 on everyone's list, so you won), and if you lose it doesn't mean the piece isn't worthy. I submitted the same piece with the same recording to a prestigious national competition three years in a row. It lost the first two years, but won the third. Same piece, same recording, different judges. Also realize that by submitting to competitions, there is a good chance your music will be heard by leading professionals. For example, a famous composer once called me out of the blue to tell me he liked a piece of mine he had heard while judging a competition (though the piece did not even place).

On the other hand, there is always the unfortunate possibility that your submission won't even be heard. When I was in graduate school, a group of composers wound the leader tapes of their submissions so that they were in the middle of the cassette. If the tape was listened to or rewound, it would be easy to tell. We submitted these to various competitions and programs and discovered that some of the most select competitions did not listen to the tapes.

Be wary of competitions with fees. If 100 composers enter a competition that awards a \$1,000 first prize, and the entry fee is \$25, then the organizers are making a \$1,500 profit, and paying the prize out of entry fees. Hmm...

To Publish or not to publish, that is the question

Unless there is a commercial or pedagogical application, one doesn't publish music for the money. Print publishers have been selling less since the advent of the Xerox machine, and the Internet is making traditional publishing even less profitable. What can an average composer expect? At most, 10-15% of the retail price of the product. In return, you give up the copyright (usually) and 50% of performance royalties. It is rare (unless

you famous) to be given money up front for print publication. So why do it? There is the potential to reach a greater audience and you have a more professional looking score to include in your portfolio.

Bigger isn't better. I have a friend who was overjoyed when G. Schirmer published one of his pieces about 10 years ago. I was jealous, because I had received a contract from a lesser-known publisher at that same time. It turns out that ten years later, his work has sold very few copies, being lost in a large catalogue and not actively "shopped," while mine has sold hundreds of copies, been performed across the country, appeared on multiple CDs and has been required repertoire in a national competition – all because the publisher shopped the product. If you are unknown and interested in performances, my recommendation is to find a small specialty publisher (one for brass music, flute music, etc.) that attends regional and/or national conventions, develops relationships with teachers and performers and takes an interest in their composers. They will introduce your music to performers. Another option is to self-publish (you then keep all royalties and profits).

Contract advice: Attach a rider stating that if the company does not sell a single copy of your piece in a given year, fails to list the work in its catalogue, dissolves without selling its catalogue to another party, etc. the copyright will revert back to you (unless some nominal amount is paid to you per year). This keeps your work from dying without hope of resurrection if the publisher sits on your piece or dissolves. Also, be aware that many contracts have a line stating that the publisher can appoint an attorney to defend your work, and that you are liable for resulting fees. Attach a rider stating that you will not pay unlimited attorney's fees (if any at all).

Commissions

I tell my students that if a good performer asks them to write a piece for them, then do it, no questions asked. Getting another piece under your belt, writing for someone you know will perform your piece well is enough payback. But once you've written several pieces, you can begin negotiating a price. For instance, when someone suggests you write a piece for them, say "I'd love to do that...let's look for some funding." This is an indirect way of saying you would need to be paid. Where do you start? Perhaps you have an affiliation with a town/university/honor society/orchestra that is having an anniversary celebration. Why not sell them the idea of a commemorative commission? Perhaps you could suggest to a friend who is giving a recital that you could provide them with a work. Or if you attend a concert by an outstanding vocalist, why not give them your portfolio and let them know you would love to write a work for them?

The only way performers will come to you is if they hear your music or if you are recommended by a trusted contact. The more your music is performed and recorded, the more groups will want to play your music. The more music of yours that is commercially available and performed, the more likely it is you will be approached for a commission.

Other ideas: apply for new works grant, apply to competitions that give a commission,

seek private or corporate funding, ask music organizations for suggestions, approach ensembles and soloists, contact local and state arts councils and consider forming a consortium.

I have received lucrative commissions by being in the right spot at the right time. Once I visited a publisher's booth at a convention minutes before someone asked that publisher to recommend a composer for a commission. I was there and got the commission. Once at a concert, on which one of my works was played, the performer introduced me to an audience member (a director) who had just asked for a reference. I have been commissioned by universities, a music manufacturer's group, a private foundation, professional performers, professional ensembles, amateur ensembles, school ensembles, former students, colleagues, an enlightened non-musician and national and local arts organizations.

Show me the money! Negotiating a commissioning contract

How much do you charge? It depends on your current compositional commitments, your level of expertise, the number and quality of commissions you have received, the amount of time given to complete the commission, length and instrumentation of the piece and the exposure you will receive from the commission. How bad do you want to write this piece? Will you need to generate a large score and parts, or piano parts? What resources are available to the commissioner? Will it be on a CD? Will it be performed on tour or at a prestigious convention? The latter may be more valuable than cash, so keep that in mind. You may even offer to lower your price if they record it, or bring it on tour, perform it at a convention or see to it that it is published.

I have had success using the following method: Instead of quoting one lump sum figure, I now quote a sliding scale. For example, if I would *like* to get \$5,000 for a short solo piece, but know I would actually do it for \$3,000, then I might say, "Apply for grants, and continue applying for grants in good faith for 2 years, with the goal of raising \$7,000. But if you are unable to receive that funding, I don't want you to lose your shirt, so I will take whatever you raise in that time, but it needs to be at least \$3,000." Most commissioners will do all they can to get you the \$7,000, and they are more likely to commission you knowing that they are only obligated to a \$3,000 outlay. Sliding scales show the commissioner that you are empathic to current economic conditions, but also know what you deserve.

Business managers

Great plan, but can you afford it? A friend was approached about 8 years ago by the manager of an up-and-coming composer (who has since garnered prestigious grants, commissions and faculty positions). The manager had a "vacancy" on her roster and offered to provide her services to my friend for \$15,000 a year. She did not guarantee commissions, performances or anything. My friend (who is also now well-known now) declined. Buyer Beware: as a business manager in New York several years ago, I witnessed widespread corruption in the music business world. Examine all contracts with

managers carefully and demand a full accounting of use of funds. If you can afford it, choose someone with a proven track record.

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