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How to Commission a New Work from Abbie Betinis

Commissioning a new piece of music can be a wonderful, rewarding experience for both the composer and the commissioning party, and there are a lot of things to think about. I find that people come to the process with many levels of experience, and every composer works in different ways, so I've outlined some details that are specific to my particular process below.

Rates

An organization called Meet the Composer sets the industry's guidelines for commissioning new work. Their last published rates (from 2004) are as follows:

 Guide to Commissioning Costs			
Instrumentation	Under 10 min.	10-25 min.	Over 25 min.
Solo or Duo	\$2,000-6,500	\$3,500-15,000	\$9,000-20,000
Trio or Quartet	\$4,000-10,000	\$8,000-25,000	\$15,000-35,000
Chorus	\$4,000-15,000	\$8,000-30,000	\$15,000-40,000
Chamber or Jazz Orchestra	\$7,000-21,000	\$12,000-46,000	\$19,000-63,000
Full Orchestra	\$9,500-26,000	\$14,000-66,000	\$30,000-103,000
Concerto: add (20-30%)			
Opera/Music Theater	One-Act	Full Length	
	\$20,000-116,000	\$56,000-465,000	

(more resources at www.meetthecomposer.org)

It takes me at least 20 hours to write, proof, edit, and engrave one minute of music, so I generally begin negotiations at \$1,000-\$1,500 per finished minute.* That said, many factors play a role in determining the commission fee. I'm always looking for interesting projects that stretch me, the audience, and your ensemble. Also, do let me know if you have concrete plans to help the piece live on past the premiere. Tell me if, for instance, you plan to make a professional recording of the commissioned piece, add it to your touring program, perform it at an international festival, partner with a sister chorus to ensure multiple performances, etc. This level of detail will help us negotiate a commission fee that works for both of us.

Payment Schedule

I prefer to be paid half the commission fee when we sign the commissioning contract, and half upon delivery of the score, but I understand I may need to default to your organization's fiscal year, grant payment schedule, or donor specifications. Some commissioning parties prefer to pay the entire fee upon the piece's completion. Others prefer 1/3 at the time of commissioning, 1/3 at the score delivery, and 1/3 at the piece's premiere.

* I do my own printing, engraving, and part extraction, so that cost is covered in my commission fee.

Time Frame

I prefer to sign a commissioning contract about two years before the new work's first rehearsal. This gives me time to work the piece into my writing schedule for the upcoming season, obtain text permission if necessary, and, of course, write, engrave, edit and proof the music.

Special Considerations for Copyrighted Text

If there is a copyrighted text to be set to music, it is my responsibility as the composer to pursue permission for performance, possible publication, and reprinting in any program. It can sometimes take a while to hear back from the writer or publisher of the copyrighted text. In fact, a turnaround time of 8-10 weeks is not uncommon in certain situations. If you are commissioning new music with a copyrighted text, please do consider that variable in your proposed schedule. Generally, any text published after 1923 will be under copyright, and could be difficult to obtain.

There is sometimes a hefty fee involved in obtaining text permission. Writers and publishers either ask a flat fee for use of a copyrighted text (which I find preferable), or half the composer's profits and royalties from the finished piece. In my experience, it is the composer who pays this fee or royalty to the copyright holder of the text, but it might be something for the commissioning party to consider when negotiating the commission fee.

Getting to Know Each Other

I love getting to know musicians and enjoy imagining you performing the finished work as I'm working on it. If attending a live performance isn't possible, I may request recordings of your ensemble, recent programs, or ask to attend a general rehearsal before even signing the contract, and certainly before beginning your piece. I've been known to post pictures of the commissioning party on my piano, ask to analyze a text over coffee with the conductor, or ask chorus members for their input on poetry. I maintain a Facebook Page where your ensemble members can interact with me, find out what I'm thinking about and working on, and ask questions about the music.

Legalities

If the commissioning party has a contract they like to use, I am usually quite happy to sign it. I can also provide my standard commissioning contract. The contract considers duration, performing forces and difficulty level of the commissioned work, payment amount and schedule, degree of communication between composer and commissioner, and states what is and is not included in the commissioning fee. The commissioning fee does not include the composer's travel to the premiere, guest lectures or community programs, interviews, workshops, etc., but I prefer to negotiate these fees at the same time as the contract, and sign a separate document if possible.

Like many composers, I keep the copyright for all my music (for later publication, distribution, etc). Most of my music is self-published through a little company I call "The Music of Abbie Betinis" which means I currently print and distribute almost all of my own music. I also have a few pieces published with larger publishing houses, including G. Schirmer, Augsburg Fortress, and Kjos Publishing, so it's possible that someday your piece may be part of a larger company's distribution. Don't worry, your "Commissioned by" credit, as well as any dedication we mutually decide on, will be forever attached to the piece on the first page of music.

An optional clause in my commissioning contract (I prefer to leave it out, but you may prefer to put it in!) allows the commissioning party sole performance or recording rights to the piece for up to one year from the premiere date. In that period, I would legally be able to advertise the piece, but could not sell copies to anyone to perform or record it without your permission. This clause can seriously affect my sales of the piece, but is available to you.

Other Requests

If possible, I love having a recording of the premiere. This need not be a professional recording, but just something I can use to help promote the finished piece. If the performance hall, recording engineer, musicians, or presenting organization has legal issues with making a recording available to me for this purpose, I will ask your permission to bring a handheld recorder to a final rehearsal.

Our Continued Relationship and Performing Rights

I love to keep in touch after working with a commissioning party. If you perform your commissioned piece in subsequent seasons please let me know! I keep an online calendar of upcoming events and enjoy letting friends and fans know of performances in their area.

Commissioning a piece of music from me gives you unlimited license to perform from your commissioned scores, but please don't forget that all living composers get paid for each performance through their particular performing rights organization. It's therefore very important that your organization (or performance venue) reports your programming to ASCAP, BMI and SESAC. I am a member of ASCAP, which sends me a small (but greatly appreciated) check every time one of my pieces is publicly performed.

Thank you for your interest in commissioning a new work! I look forward to working together.



Abbie Betinis

BELOW IS A SUMMARY OF QUESTIONS I WILL WANT TO ASK YOU BEFORE WE START:

Contact person & commissioning party:

Name of group/players to perform:

Instrumentation and Voicing (how big a group will play/sing? Are parts doubled, or is there one on a part?):

Proposed length of finished piece:

Payment schedule and amount:

Desired difficulty level:

Desired text (if applicable), author, and source of text:

Any specific timing directions (congregation needs to sing the last verse, needs to be timed for a wedding procession, etc):

Deadline for final manuscript:

Date, time, and place of premiere, and any subsequent performances:

Is the composer's presence required at the premiere?

Any other dates for which you need the composer present (rehearsals? pre-concert talk?):

How should the commissioning information read?

How should the dedication read (if applicable)?

If you hadn't commissioned this piece, what music might you have programmed in its place?