

Consider a Commission

by David Winkler

As a publisher and writer of sacred instrumental music, I often receive suggestions from directors concerning certain types of music they would like to see developed for their programs. While there is certainly a great deal more music available now than there was in the past, there are still some significant gaps in the overall repertoire of music for church instrumentalists. For example, there is very little sacred music available for groups such as saxophone ensembles, or for some of the more unusual solo instruments.

Because many of these needs are quite specialized in nature, it is often not financially feasible for publishers to develop such materials. And because of the time involved in writing and the need to make a living, most professional composers cannot justify the effort to write unless there is the promise of payment, either through a commission or through a publishing contract.

It is here where I would like to challenge directors needing music for their programs to become involved in the process of helping to bring about the creation of new music. A gifted composer may have some great music inside his creative being, but unless there is encouragement and support of his craft, his ideas may never come to fruition. As John Rutter, the famous British composer once stated in an interview with *Creator* magazine, "There's no doubt that a firm commission from a definite group with a concrete deadline is of great help in getting a piece out of the head and onto paper."

With these thoughts in mind, I would like to present a few suggestions to help make a commission a successful experience.

WHO: The person you choose to write your commissioned work may be an well-known, established writer, or a local musician of adequate ability, such as a college professor or one of his students. Whom you choose may depend upon your budget, the deadline for the project, or the distance factor (i.e., whether the project can be completed successfully even if the composer lives in another city).

COST: The approximate cost for the project should be agreed upon from the start. Factors which may affect the cost are: the number of instrumental parts involved; the technical difficulty of the music; the length of the piece; and the deadline for completion of the project.

COPYRIGHT: Publishing rights for the music are usually retained by the writer. If

the music is an arrangement of an existing song which is not in the public domain, you'll need to obtain a license from the copyright owner and pay a fee for use of the copyright. Take care of this early in the process, and be sure to send your writer confirmation when you have obtained the license from the copyright owner. The license should contain specific wording for the copyright notice which will need to be included at the bottom of the first page of the score and each extracted part, so be sure to send that to your writer as well.

SOURCE OF FUNDING: If possible, include funds for at least one commission every year as part of your regular budget. Propose the commissioning of a new work to commemorate a special event or anniversary. Think about possibilities of funding through individuals, memorial gifts, or grants from a foundation. Perhaps your church or organization could join together with several others to commission a new work. When all else fails, consider some creative financing (I once wrote a solo woodwind piece for a lady who, in return, fashioned a winter coat for my wife!).

WHAT: Of course, you want your composer to “write a great piece,” but most writers work best when given some parameters. Discuss the general idea of what you are wanting, including the purpose of the commission. Help your writer become familiar with your performing group – the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble, the exact instrumentation you need, and even some details about the performance area. Show your writer examples of music which has worked well for you as a model for him to study.

WHEN: If the piece you have in mind is a larger work, it is best to contact your writer at least six months to a year before the time you want to perform it (smaller pieces may require less of a lead time, depending on how busy your composer is). Set up a definite deadline for when you will need the score, allowing extra time for any revisions you may request after you've reviewed the first draft of the piece. And be sure to schedule ample rehearsal time in order to properly prepare the piece for its premiere performance.

FOLLOWUP: If your writer is not able to attend the performance of the work, he will appreciate receiving a recording of the piece as well as a copy of the printed program listing the work.

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