

# THE PROCESS OF COMMISSIONING A NEW CHORAL WORK

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## WHERE TO BEGIN:

- Contact the composer (Email/Website/Facebook Message/Phone Call) and let them know about your interest in commissioning a new piece. Provide some basic information—who you are, where you are located, choir name/voicing, choir size, and approximate timeline.

## TIMELINE:

- When would you like to start rehearsing and what are your plans for the world premiere performance of this piece? Most composers like to be notified at least six months (one year preferred) before you would like the premiere to take place. Allow plenty of time for the creative and rehearsal process.

## COMPOSITION DETAILS:

1. **Text/Poem** - Sacred/Secular? Language? Public domain? (Every book and poem written prior to 1923 is in the public domain). Or new original poem by a living author?

Most composers will have suggestions for texts. Suggest options if you'd like - a text that you are drawn to - or a "style" of text. Will your choir respond to the text? Will the audience respond? Both parties should feel good about the poem before moving forward.

2. **Voicing/Level** - SATB? SATB div? SAB or 3-part? SSA? SSAA? TTB? TBB? TTBB? Other specific voicing? Size of choir? Skill level? Consider the strengths and weaknesses of your choir.

3. **Accompaniment** - A cappella? With piano? Obligato instrument? String quartet? Percussion? Other?

4. **General Style/Mood** - Upbeat, lively, rhythmic, slow, legato. Is there a particular piece you like so the composer can get an idea of the style you are wanting? The composer ultimately decides the style/mood based on the text/poetry.

5. **Programming** - Where would you like this piece to fit into your program? Opener? Anthem? Closer? "Signature Song" (perform on every concert)? "Barn Burner?" Ballad? Sentimental?

6. **Comfortable Budget** - Where will the commission money come from? Do you have financial support from your administration/fundraising/board, etc.? The fee is negotiable. I always like to work with each specific group to find a fee that works for you and your budget. Composers typically ask for half of the fee up front (thirty days after the commission contract is signed) and the other half once the piece is finished (thirty days after you receive the completed score). This can be negotiated as well.

7. **Specific ensemble restrictions/requirements** - Strongest section? Weakest section? Give other specifics about your choir. Exact range limitations for each section are helpful.

8. **Approximate duration** - How long do you want this piece to be? Most current compositions are between 2-5 minutes. Major work? (Allow at least two years for a major work).

9. **Dedication** - Special wording for you and your choir that will appear at the top of the first page. Permanent. The commissioner determines this. Most of the time this appears in the published score.

10. **Title** (typically determined by the composer based on the poetry)

-Do you have a theme for your concert? Should the title of this piece dictate or reflect your theme?

### **CONTRACT:**

- After an agreement has been made, the composer will draft a commission contract (protects both parties).
- Always use a contract, regardless of your relationship with the composer. Sign, scan, return.
- Sit back and relax...the creative process begins!

### **CREATIVE PROCESS:**

- Do not expect to hear anything during this process. Some composers send “sample” pages, others do not. Creating new music takes time. For me, I like to spend a month or two just reading the poetry—memorizing it, and getting a feel of the natural flow and rhythm of the text.
- The composer determines all of the artistic decisions during the creative process (keys, time signatures, style, use of poetry/repetition, rhythms, melodies, harmonies, dynamics, tempos, character, mood, etc.)
- The final score will be sent via Email as a PDF - as stated in the contract, as the commissioner, you are allowed to print the PDF and photocopy as many copies as needed for your performing ensemble. You have permanent ownership of these scores and they may be filed in your library (you do not have to purchase published octavos), though you may not share or loan these photocopied scores with other ensembles.
- Your choir has exclusive performing rights until the premiere of the piece takes place.
- If performing at contest, ask the composer for a signed letter stating that photocopies are permissible. Print for judges.

### **REHEARSALS:**

- If possible, give a copy of the score to your accompanist to practice before the first rehearsal.
- Spend time with the music, prepare and score study before the first rehearsal - try not to “read through it” with your choir - know it well, have it learned and edited. Plan your interpretation before rehearsing.
- Send a quick email/message to the composer to let them know you received the PDF and have started rehearsing.

- Let the composer know of any “typos” or “misprints” you find in the score so they can fix before publishing.
- Invite the composer (and/or poet) to come work with your choir or plan a Skype/FaceTime session to talk about the music, or to listen and give feedback.
- Schedule time for the composer to talk about the creative process and for the singers/students to ask questions.

### **PREMIERE PERFORMANCE:**

- Special event! It’s a big deal. Share on social media. Invite your administration. Let the audience know/explain.
- Make it the featured piece or concert “theme” - include title/info (“World Premiere Performance”) on the poster and in the program.
- Invite the composer (and/or poet) to attend, save them a seat in the hall, know where they are located.
- Acknowledge the composer (and/or poet) after the piece - invite them to stand/wave/bow from the audience.
- Get a great recording (have a recording session before or after performance if needed) for publication.

### **COPYRIGHT/PUBLICATION:**

- The composer owns the completed composition and all copyrights. They may assign the copyrights to any publisher of their choice. The entire publishing process often takes between six months and a year before the music is “in print” and ready for other choirs to purchase and perform.

All of this may seem like a lot to think about, but it is important to remember that by commissioning new music you are:

1. Creating a unique and exciting experience for your singers/students, administration, parents, and community.
2. Challenging yourself to interpret a new piece of music from scratch and bring it to life.
3. Contributing to the body of twenty-first century choral repertoire.
4. Working to gain local and national exposure for you, your choir, and the composer.
5. Supporting the livelihood of living composers and poets.

By thinking through all of these details well in advance, commissioning a new piece of music can be an enjoyable and rewarding process for everyone involved.

