

# Commissioning- from the composers point of view

by Michael Short

Having finished a new work, some composers simply put the score in a cupboard and forget about it, with no thought of performance and no intention of bringing it to anyone's notice. I assure you that such composers are in a very small minority. Most composers want to hear their works played, and want to write music which is of some use to other musicians. They also usually have quite definite ideas about the works they want to write, which is why they become composers in the first place. Performers, on the other hand, usually have definite ideas about what they want to play, and the process of commissioning a new work is the gentle art of bringing these two points of view together.

## Style

It is very important to choose your composer carefully. In today's diverse musical world styles vary widely, from the avant-garde to textbook conservatism, and some performers have been disappointed by the works they have commissioned simply because the composers style did not coincide with their expectations. Most composers or their publishers would be happy to supply inspection copies and sample recordings of their work to help you make up your mind, and scores and recordings can be consulted at the British Music Information Centre in London (whose catalogue is now on line via the Internet) and at similar centres in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The current addresses of composers and their publishers are given in the British Music Yearbook. You might even be adventurous and choose a composer who has never written band music before - the result may be something quite unusual!

## Fees

Most composers would like to be paid for their labours. The amount of sheer hard work in producing a score for full band would earn quite a lot of money if carried out in any other field of employment. Some composers employed in full time jobs (musical or otherwise) have been known to write music in their spare time for nothing, and I have even heard of a distinguished academic composer writing a new work for a commission fee of two pints of beer (and even that was unpaid!) I also heard an eminent conductor boasting about the low fees he had paid to well-known American composers to write new works for band. But most professional composers depend for their living on a variety of income sources, including sales and performance royalties, writing about music and part-time teaching, and need a reasonable commission fee to help meet the continual cost of survival. A lot depends on the performing organisations financial circumstances, but money can be raised from local arts associations, educational trusts, lottery funding, sponsorship and fundraising concerts, or by joining in a consortium with other bands. The usual arrangement is for half the fee to be paid to the composer at the time of commissioning, and the remainder when the score is delivered.

## Time-scale

Original music cannot be produced instantaneously - the composer needs time for his ideas to gestate. So plan a long time in advance, allowing enough time for preliminary discussions, the actual composing of the piece, preparation of a full score and complete set of parts, not to mention the necessary rehearsals before the première performance. The composer may also have other commissions to carry out, and therefore may not be able to start work on your piece until other projects have been completed.

## Instrumentation

This should be agreed with the composer at the outset, as there is nothing more irksome to a composer than having to re-think the scoring and re-write a full score when already half-way through. Try to settle on some kind of standard instrumentation, even though you may not have all the instruments to hand at the time of commissioning. Circumstances may change, and that brilliant soprano saxophonist for whom a solo has been specially written may have gone off to university by the time the première takes place!

## Materials

Composing the music is only half the story - there is also the full score and a complete set of parts to think about. In the past, a commissioned composer would provide a manuscript full score, and the parts would then be written out by a copyist paid either by the performing organisation or by the composers publisher. But it is now much more common for the composer to produce a full score on his own computer, from which parts can be printed out fairly easily. Even so, this task can take some time, so if your band includes a computer enthusiast, perhaps they could extract, edit and print the parts from the composer's computer file.

## Contracts and copyright

To avoid any misunderstanding, it is helpful to have some kind of written agreement about the commission. This doesn't have to be a lengthy contract in legal jargon - just a letter will do, as long as it sets out the time scale, instrumentation, duration of the piece, composers fee, arrangements for producing the parts, and perhaps also an agreement that the composer should be present at the first performance. Some performers have the impression that by commissioning a piece they thereby acquire the copyright, but this is not so, unless it is specifically mentioned in the contract. Copyright is the right to make copies, by photocopying, publishing, or recording, and also includes the right of performance. The composer usually retains copyright in the work, which he may keep for himself or assign to a publisher, and he will usually assign the performing right to the Performing Right Society.

So the performer may well ask: "What do we get for the money?" The answer is that you have taken part in the creation of a new work which did not exist before and may well never have existed but for your efforts. Your band will give the première performance, the fact of which will be documented on the score when the piece is published, and, who knows, it may even eventually become a standard item in the band repertoire. If desired, it can be agreed that the commissioning band will have the sole right of performance for a limited period, say for one or two years, after which the piece can then be performed by others.

## Afterlife

When planning a new piece with the composer, it is important to bear in mind that it will probably eventually be performed by other musicians, and it should therefore avoid the narrow constraints of a special occasion and have a wider appeal to other players. Try to think about how your band will appear (and what you would say to your funding providers) if the work has a weird instrumentation and is only suitable for playing on say the Ides of March at the end of a millennium. Alternatively, think of the kudos acquired if the work has standard instrumentation, is suitable for normal concert use, and is playable, fascinating, challenging, and a delight for both players and listeners. I wish you the best of luck!

*Michael Short is a well-known and widely-played composer of music in a wide-variety of genres. He has recently retired as Professor of Music at Kneller Hall.*

## Guidelines on Commission Fees 1999 - 2000

Fee Guidelines issued by the Association of Professional Composers and the Composers' Guild of Great Britain

Large Chamber Ensemble 10-20 players	£195-£315 per minute
Chamber Orchestra	£265-£420 per minute
Orchestra or Band	£315-£325 per minute

Please note: the lower end of the band is for less established composers, the upper figure is not necessarily the maximum.

NB: The cost of preparation of the performing material is not to be included in the commission fee for the composer, except by special arrangement.