

BY DAVID LUDWIG

CHIEF COMMISSIONER

Curtis generates a substantial body of new music. Let us count the ways.



The job of “composer” is a strange and mysterious thing for people to wrap their heads around. Even instrumentalists who have spent their lives in music wonder *what* exactly we composers do and *how* we do it. While I won't pretend that I can explain *how* composers write music in an 800-word (or 800-page) article, I can at least address one aspect of *what* we do and share some of my own experiences that involve how we are hired: the commission.

I remember a composition seminar during my student years when an august representative from one of the performance rights organizations came to speak to us. She said we must only write on commission after we graduated. One student challenged her, saying, “But what if I just want to write a piece for a friend for free?” She bellowed back at him, “You, young man, are a part of the problem!” Her point was made.

Throughout history composers have relied on the patronage of others, whether religious institutions, wealthy aristocrats, or impresarios. Today composers living in the U.S. usually get our commissions from individual donors, foundations in the form of grants and awards, and musical institutions like orchestras and schools. Curtis is an institution that commissions its composers in multiple ways, and I would submit that the sum of these commissioning programs makes our school a more active supporter of its own creative work than any other. Here the works of student composers are performed often, and with enthusiasm and engagement.

One very “learn by doing” way of commissioning happens when a student giving a graduation recital requests that the school sponsor a new work by one of their peers. This practice has been going on for decades and is a wonderful way to introduce instrumentalists to the practicalities of commissioning a composer. Every year several new pieces appear on graduation programs in this way, and student composers and performers gain valuable experience in the collaborative process of preparing a new work and presenting it to the public.

UNIQUE SATISFACTION

A few years ago, the advancement department at Curtis started a program to commission students and alumni to write new pieces dedicated to individual donors. These works are often written for a student whose fellowship is supported by the donor. In this arrangement, everyone wins. The composer receives a commission for a new chamber piece which is both performed and recorded. The performers acquire the experience of preparing and playing new music. Donors, meanwhile, have the unique satisfaction of knowing a new work was written in their name, and the unique and thrilling experience of hearing a piece that would not have existed without their support.

Two ongoing commissions have grown out of this donor program. One, funded by former Curtis board chair Dr. Milton Rock and his wife, Connie, is a commission for the annual gala of the Rock School for Dance Education. One of our students writes a short ballet in collaboration with choreographers and dancers from the Rock School. The other is a new

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work for the annual, citywide “One Book, One Philadelphia” program of the Free Library of Philadelphia, in which a Curtis student composer responds to the chosen book of the year. This work, commissioned with support from Joseph and Marie Field, is performed at a public event associated with the selected book, reaching an audience far beyond Curtis.

Both these opportunities allow our students to be broadly inspired in considering the interaction of other art forms with their music. Last year my student Nick DiBerardino wrote a wonderful work for percussionist Neil Rao, *Homunculus*, which was featured on a One Book, One Philadelphia program and again on Neil’s graduation recital. Chelsea Komschlies wrote a wind quintet for the Rock School Ballet and had the chance to collaborate directly with a professional choreographer as she composed her first dance work.

TOURING NEW WORKS

Curtis On Tour features a new work by a Curtis composer on nearly every tour—and often it’s a piece commissioned expressly for the tour ensemble. The first of these pieces was by yours truly: *From the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* was written as a companion piece to Stravinsky’s *L’histoire du soldat*, which we toured in 2009.

Since then, Curtis has commissioned many new works for its tours, including *Book of Days*, Daron Hagen’s trio for clarinet, viola, and piano; Zhou Tian’s guitar quartet *Red Trees, Wrinkled Cliffs*, Kat Kramarchuk Souponetsky’s *Summer Shimmers* for wind quintet; and Yevgeniy Sharlat’s *RIPEFG* for string quartet, just to name a few.

By commissioning its composers, Curtis is investing in the future of music. It is also serving as a role model for its students and graduates. It’s not just about the responsibility of musicians to grow the repertoire, but the incredibly rewarding experience for everyone who takes part in the process of creating and performing new works. ♦

David Ludwig is the Gie and Lisa Liem Dean of Artistic Programs and Performance, a member of the composition faculty, and artistic director of the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble.

COMMISSIONING 101

In which we answer some questions about commissioning that you might have been afraid to ask...

How do I find the funds to commission a composer? Once you’ve identified a composer you want to commission, there are several ways to go about finding support. A wide range of grant-awarding organizations may help with a commissioning fee, including New Music USA, the American Composers Forum, and Chamber Music America. Some institutions will ask individual donors to sponsor a piece. Consortiums and crowdfunding are also good avenues to generating support.

How do consortiums work? Consortiums spread the cost of a commission among several organizations. The violin concerto I wrote for my wife, Bella Hristova, was commissioned by a consortium of eight different orchestras, with additional funding from New Music USA. In a consortium each participating ensemble gets a regional premiere, the composer receives many performances of the work, and the performer gets multiple engagements. It’s another instance of “everyone wins.”

What is a crowdfunded commission? Artists and organizations are increasingly turning to crowdsourced funding sites like Indiegogo or Kickstarter. Each contributing individual chooses an amount to direct toward a commissioning fee (and sometimes artist fees, recording costs, and other project elements). When I wrote a piece for ECCO to perform at the Lake Champlain Festival, eighty-nine supporters from the festival community pitched in. Every one of them had their name printed inside the score.

How much do commissions cost? The cost of a commission depends on the length and size of the piece, the stature of the composer, and many other factors. Sometimes people are surprised by the cost of a commission; but remember that a composer can spend months (if not years in some cases) creating a single work.

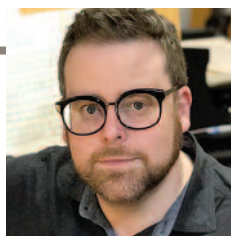
How can I get the process started? One of the best online resources I’ve seen is *Commissioning Music: A Basic Guide*, available at the New Music USA website (www.newmusicusa.org). The American Composers Forum (<https://composersforum.org/>) is also a great place to learn more about commissioning a new work.

The best resource of all? Ask your friendly neighborhood composer!



Opposite (left to right): Commissioned for Curtis on Tour: Yevgeniy Sharlat, Daron Hagen, Kat Kramarchuk Souponetsky, Zhou Tian

Above: Student composers commissioned in 2017-18: Nick DiBerardino, Chelsea Komschlies



David Ludwig

EVERYONE WINS. THE COMPOSER RECEIVES A COMMISSION. THE PERFORMERS ACQUIRE THE EXPERIENCE OF PLAYING NEW MUSIC. AND DONORS ENJOY THE THRILLING EXPERIENCE OF HEARING A PIECE THAT WOULD NOT HAVE EXISTED WITHOUT THEIR SUPPORT.