

Band Music Reviews (February 2010)

Carolyn Barber

Director of Bands

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

As promised, it's time to explore the ins and outs of commissioning new works, with practical suggestions to help get your band connected directly to the creative flow. Commissioning can seem like a daunting task, and many directors are uncertain as to how to begin. I would recommend starting close to home. There are composers all around us, most of whom would enthusiastically embrace an opportunity to write for your group. Check out the Nebraska Composers Alliance (www.nebraskacomposers.org), ArtsAha (<http://artsaha.org/>) and the New Music Agency (<http://www.newmusicagency.org/>) for talent right here in the Cornhusker State.

If you're worried that your group doesn't sound like the U.S. Marine Band, or even the Marine Supply and Bait Shop Band, let me set your mind at ease. The beauty of commissioning is the custom fit. Did you know that Phil Jackson is bow legged? (The basketball coach – bear with me, this will connect in a moment). He is, but you'd never know because his tailor compensates for it when making his trousers. Throughout the commissioning process, many composers spend considerable time getting to know the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble, and the personalities of the players, and any extra-musical parameters called for in the contract. For a recent peek into this process, check out <http://www.bandquest.org/music/brubeck.shtml>! You'll have an opportunity to watch composer Chris Brubeck (yes, that Brubeck; he's Dave's son) in action with the West Rocks Middle School Band. While you're in the BandQuest neighborhood, you might also check out Dana Wilson interacting with the students who premiered his *Odysseus and the Sirens*.

Concerned about funding? One simple way to defray costs is to become a part of a consortium. This email blast arrived a few weeks ago from Eric Whitacre:

"I'm trying to (quickly) put together a small but dedicated consortium of bands to premiere my new transcription of *The Seal Lullaby*. It's scored for wind symphony and solo piano, grade 2+/3. If you

or your ensemble is interested, or would like more information please email my assistant Juliette at juliette@ericwhitacre.com. Woo hoo!"

Consortia are forming all the time, and CBDNA (the College Band Directors National Association) even has a system to help folks manage the invoicing and payment. Other funding resources include partnerships with arts organizations and governmental agencies, such as The Commission Project <http://www.garciamusic.com/educator/clinics/funding.opps/tcp.html>

Some advice from the BandQuest folks: The American Composers Forum has an "Opportunities" listing at www.composersforum.org and in the semi-monthly newsletter "Sounding Board" you can submit a request for brand new scores from composers to see what music is already written for band. It's like adopting a puppy. Simply write up the guidelines of what kind of piece you are looking for and ACF will list it *for free*. You could also utilize this service if you decide you'd like to commission a composer for your band or for a consortium of bands. Write up the guidelines for a piece that would like to commission and include the amount that you would be willing to pay.

Not sure about the going rate for band music? I'm sure the friendly folks at Nebraska Composers Alliance would be happy to offer guidance, and there are national resources as well. Meet the Composer publications can be found at <http://www.meetthecomposer.org/publications> and MENC Forums on the subject include <http://www.menc.org/forums/viewtopic.php?id=2332> Scared about the legalities? Advice is easy to find at sites such as <http://www.newmusicbox.org/article.nmbx?id=4341>, and I would be happy to share a sample contract passed along to me by Timothy Mahr.

Another great "go to" guy is Andrew Boysen. Every year, Dr. Boysen selects a graduate student to write a piece for a local high school. The school gets a new piece of music every year, the students have the opportunity to work with an emerging composer, and the composer gets their first commission to add to their resume (and \$100). It's a win-win-win situation, so why not chat with your local college or university composition faculty? Or check out BandQuest's Continental Harmony program, in partnership with PBS. Their site is dedicated to directors who would like to work with a composer in a community or school. Visit www.pbs.org/harmony/toolkit/ for a sample letter of agreement, residency checklist, and other resources that might be helpful to you as you begin a partnership with a composer.

You might be wondering, why go to all that work when I could just go to the music store and buy a piece off the shelf? Dr. Mahr addressed this very question in his presentation for the Missouri MEA conference in 2008. He cited four great reasons:

- The value of experiencing the creative process first hand
- The sense of possession for students
- The sense of contributing to the repertoire for the director
- The composer as a concept – a living, breathing artist rather than an historical, “dead” entity

I would add one more as a teaser for my next article: the new music being published and sold “off the shelf” is not the new music being performed by the best bands in the country. If you want to bring your program into the 21st century, talk to a composer.