

CMAAMatters

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Commissioning Consortia, an introduction

by GAIL WEIN

It's gratifying to add to the cultural canon by commissioning a composer to write a new work. But for many chamber music organizations, the cost of doing so may be out of reach.

Others may feel that fostering a new work for a single performance does not make sense. One solution is to spread the costs and the work among several organizations. Pooling resources not only enables some participants to get a commission that they would not be able to afford on their own, it also ensures that the work will have a life beyond the world premiere.

This sharing is known as a commissioning consortium, and it has become an increasingly popular way to fund new music.

WHY CREATE A CONSORTIUM?

Beyond the obvious benefit of splitting the bill, a consortium also

- allows more organizations to be part of the creative process;
- builds broad interest around a composer and the new work;
- guarantees that the work will be performed more than once, often in different parts of the country or world, and affords the opportunity to have it performed before diverse audiences and communities;
- heightens the commissioning institutions' visibility beyond their own communities;
- builds lasting relationships among the consortium partners, between composer and ensemble, and between presenters and communities; and
- virally multiplies the news about the new work, through multi-partner marketing and presentations.

GENERATING INTEREST AND CHOOSING PARTNERS

Once you have decided that you would like your commission to be a group effort, you'll want to collect a group of like-minded partners. More often than not, this is accomplished by building on existing relationships with your colleagues. You might want to consider partnering with institutions similar to yours—i.e., organizations with comparable-sized budgets and presenters with kindred missions.

Often, the partners consist of a group of presenters or venues, but sometimes two or more ensembles will band together to commission a work.

Typically, one person or partner takes the lead in a multi-partner commission. That lead partner—whether a presenter or an ensemble—conceives of the project and



may even suggest the composer. The lead partner develops a framework for the commission and then strives to get others interested in joining it in a consortium.

Philip Bither, curator of performing arts at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, cautions against underestimating the time it takes to advocate for the project and attract colleagues to become co-commissioners. He adds that artist managers and booking agents, by coming up with ideas and even pitching projects to prospective members of the consortium, are often critical to pulling together such partnerships.

EXAMPLE 1: MUSIC ACCORD

Music Accord is a special case—a group of ten major presenters from across the United States that pool their resources on an ongoing basis. Since its formation in

1997, Music Accord has commissioned more than twenty new works through its collaboration with such composers as William Bolcom, Elliott Carter and Osvaldo Golijov, and with artists such as Emanuel Ax, the Borromeo String Quartet and Thomas Hampson.

Music Accord's members are: The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center; Center for the Performing Arts at Penn State University; Hancher Auditorium at University of Iowa; Bank of America Celebrity Series; Krannert Center Marquee Series at University of Illinois; the Library of Congress; Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts; San Francisco Performances; Tanglewood, and the University Musical Society at the University of Michigan.

Each of these presenters contributes equally to a fund from which commissioning fees are taken. Representatives of the member organizations meet regularly by phone or in person to make decisions about projects, composers and premieres in an egalitarian manner.

EXAMPLE 2: THE CALDER QUARTET AND CHRISTOPHER ROUSE

The members of the Calder Quartet and composer Christopher Rouse got to know one another at the Aspen Music Festival and School and later strengthened their relationship at the La Jolla Music Society. Ultimately, the Calderes were able to persuade Rouse to compose a string quartet for them.

The ensemble could not afford the commission on its own, however; it needed help to realize the project. And since Rouse had not written a quartet in 20 years, the Calderes wanted to make a big splash—by performing the new piece for noteworthy concert presenters around the country.

The ensemble approached the International Festival of Arts and Ideas in New Haven, CT, with the concept. The festival's leadership was enthusiastic about the project and decided to broaden the project to include other, similar festivals.

Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and the La Jolla Music Society joined in as co-commissioners. Each organization raised a portion of the commission fee, with the

International Festival of Arts and Ideas contributing a slightly larger amount for the privilege of presenting the world premiere. The overall budget was bolstered by the quartet's successful application to the CMA Classical Commissioning Program.

The work will be premiered at the International Festival of Arts and Ideas in June 2010, and will be performed in La Jolla and in Santa Fe in summer 2010.

EXAMPLE 3: THE MALLARMÉ CHAMBER PLAYERS—AND FRIENDS

Anna Ludwig Wilson, founder of the Durham, North Carolina-based Mallarmé Chamber Players, had long wanted to commission a work from composer Gabriela Lena Frank. The two women had even decided on an instrumental configuration: flute (Wilson is a flutist), viola, cello and harp. Only one thing stood in the way of the project reaching fruition—money. Mallarmé simply could not afford the commission on its own. Wilson presented the project to the ensemble's artistic director, Suzanne Rousso, who enlisted partners to share the cost.

At first, Mallarmé formed a consortium with two other organizations. But these initial partners backed out. "They decided they didn't really fit in," says Rousso. No matter: Rousso brought her concept to the 2009 CMA National Conference. There she met with representatives from other ensembles and quickly found potential partners. Back home, she started calling other likely prospects, and within weeks had lined up a consortium of seven organizations nationwide: Mallarmé, Colorado Chamber Players, Fulcrum Arts, Pacific Serenades, Cornish Music Series, Monadnock Music and the Azure Ensemble.

Because Mallarmé's portion of the fee was already in its operating budget, the organization took on a third of the project's costs, with the rest being divided among the other groups. The Mallarmé Chamber Players are scheduled to give the quartet's premiere in May 2011; after that, the other ensembles will have an 18-month window in which to perform the piece.

Rousso notes that the consortium plan will give the work an airing that it wouldn't

get from one commissioner alone. As she sees it, the arrangement makes artistic as well as economic sense: "It's a win-win as far as I'm concerned."

GETTING STARTED: DETERMINING THE BREADTH OF THE NEW WORK AND DECIDING HOW TO SHARE THE COSTS

The consortium partners need to work together to determine the specifics about the new piece of music, such as instrumentation, duration, multi-media and interdisciplinary elements, and guest artists. All of these factors will affect the composer's fee and production costs.

The commission fee is negotiated with the composer or his/her representative. Once the partners have determined the amount and added in mutual production costs, they need to decide if each partner will pay an equal share, or if one presenter will pay a premium to have the world premiere.

IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

You'll need to specify early on whether one presenter will be taking the lead in making most of the decisions, if the project will be a wholly egalitarian effort, or some combination of the two approaches.

Do not underestimate the additional time it may take when multiple partners are involved. Think about how much lead time you and the other partners will need for fundraising and project development. When will the first rehearsal be, and how many months before that date will the composer need to deliver parts? Scheduling the premiere and subsequent performances is trickier when taking into account multiple presenters' calendars, along with the artists' schedules, and the composer's other obligations.

CREDIT AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How will the partners be acknowledged? Most often, all of the members of a consortium are listed in the score (along with the premiere dates) and in the printed concert program, in perpetuity. If the partners have not shared the costs equally, determine whether the institutions will be credited and acknowledged differently. Partners may also be credited on any and all marketing materials, including press releases, advertising, banners, radio spots, etc. Funding organizations and major donors will need to be acknowledged as well.

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PUT IT IN WRITING

Once the consortium partners, composer, ensemble, timeline and other parameters are in place, it is imperative to get your agreement in writing. Usually, these details are spelled out in the letter of agreement or contract between the composer and the commissioning partners.

Steven Ovitsky, executive director of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, has a stance that is fairly typical: “We always have a written contract between the commissioners and the composer specifying all aspects of the composition and the financial arrangements among the commissioners and composer.” (See “The Commissioning Agreement,” below right, for suggested contract items.)

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Consortiums also have their downsides, of course. As a partner in a consortium, you will not have complete control over the parameters of the work. You may not be at liberty to dictate a timeline for rehearsal and performances that is ideal for your organization. The resulting piece may be a result of a compromise, and, hence, could be less than cutting-edge or might not adhere to your original vision.

“Commissioning by consortium can be more labor-intensive for some of the parties than it is for others,” cautions Barrie Steinberg, executive director of the International Arts Foundation, who has participated in a number of commissioning consortia. Steinberg points out that having several presenters means that the composer must collect payment from multiple sources, and track multiple contracts.

On the positive side, she notes that joining a consortium has proved to be an effective way to encourage individual donors who have been looking for a way to get involved with a presenter or venue, but haven’t yet found the right entry point.

The consortium model can also be a gateway to commissioning music in the future. Portland (OR)’s Friends of Chamber Music, for example, had never commissioned a piece of music in its 71-year history. The group was one of twelve presenters that commissioned Ellen Taaffe Zwilich to write a septet for the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio and Miami String Quartet. The work premiered in fall 2009.

Friends of Chamber Music executive director Pat Zagelow says that her organization didn’t actively seek out the commission; but when the cellist Sharon

Resources

GENERAL

Meet The Composer, a service organization supporting the creation of new music, offers *Introduction to Commissioning*, a free, comprehensive guide available at www.meetthecomposer.org.

CHOOSING A COMPOSER

NATIONAL: Consult **Chamber Music America**, **American Music Center** (AMC), **American Composers Forum** (ACF), and **Meet The Composer** (MTC) for a broad look at U.S. composers. CMA lists all of its member composers online, with direct links to individual websites. AMC’s on-line database of American music features a number of audio and score samples.

REGIONAL OR LOCAL: Connect with a **regional chapter** of the ACF, or with **community-specific** composer associations, such as atlantacomposers.com, or New York Women Composers.

CHOOSING AN ENSEMBLE

Consult CMA’s annual **Membership Directory** for contact information and descriptions for more than 800 ensembles.

The Commissioning Agreement

Some points to include:

- List of partners, composer and performing artist(s)
- Commission fee
- Other fees, including copying, parts, etc.
- Payment schedule
- Parameters of the work: duration, instrumentation, multi-media elements
- Production requirements (e.g., theatrical sets, lighting, site-specific considerations)
- Community and educational outreach facets
- Timeline and delivery dates for:
 - Score
 - Parts
 - Rehearsal period
 - World premiere and other performance dates
 - Recording, if applicable
- Credit language and method of acknowledgment for consortium partners, funding organizations and major donors

For a more comprehensive list of points to consider including in any commission contract, consult MTC’s *Introduction to Commissioning*.

Robinson approached them with the idea, they thought, “It’s time to do this.” The consortium aspect of the commission made the project manageable financially, and “the fact that the Frank Salomon Associates office [which manages both ensembles] coordinated the details made it easier for us,” says Zagelow. “And now that we’ve broken this barrier, we will be much more inclined to consider commissioning again.”

Gail Wein is a classical music communications consultant, specializing in CD promotion and composer management. For many years she produced the public radio program Performance Today; and she has been a radio host and producer in Washington, D.C., Dallas, and St. Louis. Wein’s journalist credits include stories in The Washington Post, Musical America, Symphony magazine and New Music Box.

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Date
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CMA Events and Opportunities

CMA Showcase at the Western Arts Alliance Conference—CMA will produce an evening concert showcasing member ensembles.

DEADLINE: June 11, 2010

FMI: Marc Giosi, (212) 242-2022, ext. 14, or mgiosi@chamber-music.org

REGIONAL ARTS CONFERENCES

Exhibits, performances, networking, speakers, classes and workshops for presenters, artists, and agents

Western Arts Alliance/WAA

DATES: August 30–September 3, 2010

Long Beach, CA
FMI: www.westarts.org

Midwest Arts Conference/Arts Midwest

DATES: September 13–16, 2010

Indianapolis, IN
FMI: www.artsmidwest.org

Performing Arts Exchange/PAE

DATES: September 29–October 2, 2010

Pittsburgh, PA
FMI: <http://pae.southarts.org>

Other Events and Programs

GRANT SUPPORT

ACMP—The Chamber Music Network—

Support for adult amateur chamber music workshops, including coaches' salaries, reduced registration fees, and scholarships.

DEADLINE: April 30, 2010.

FMI: www.acmp.net

USArtists International—Funding for U.S.-based ensembles that have been invited to participate in international festivals.

DEADLINE: May 3, 2010, for events taking place July 1, 2010–June 30, 2011

FMI: www.midatlanticarts.org

Challenge America: Reaching Every Community Fast-Track Review Grants

NEA support for projects that extend the reach of the arts to underserved populations.

DEADLINE: May 27, 2010.

FMI: www.nea.gov

Learning in the Arts for Children and Youth

NEA support for projects that advance arts education for children and youth in school-based or community-based settings.

DEADLINE: June 10, 2010.

FMI: www.nea.gov

Aaron Copland Fund for Music/Performing Ensembles Program—Support for organizations whose performances encourage and improve public appreciation of contemporary American art music.

DEADLINE: June 30, 2010

FMI: www.coplandfund.org

Jazz.NEXT—Support for innovative uses of technology to reach jazz audiences.

DEADLINE: July 1, 2010

FMI: www.midatlanticarts.org

Trust for Mutual Understanding

Grants to nonprofits for cultural exchanges with institutions and individuals in Russia and Eastern/Central Europe. Letter of inquiry required by May 1, 2010.

DEADLINE: August 1, 2010.

FMI: www.tmuny.org

Access to Artistic Excellence—NEA support for artistic excellence in projects that preserve the U.S. cultural heritage and provide access to the arts for all Americans.

DEADLINE: August 12, 2010

FMI: www.nea.gov