

The Question of Commissioning Fees in the US: A Composer's Perspective

La question des honoraires de commande aux États-Unis : le point de vue d'un compositeur

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Article abstract

Active professional composers of concert and dramatic music continue to rely on commissions as an important source of income. Theodore Wiprud, a composer and senior arts administrator, examines how the sources and distribution of commissions has evolved in recent years in United States. A range of working composers discuss their experiences and how the nature of a given commission can affect everything from the creative process to a new work's reception and performance opportunities.

The Question of Commissioning Fees in the US: A Composer's Perspective

Theodore Wiprud

*When bankers get together for dinner, they discuss Art.
When artists get together for dinner, they discuss Money.*

—Oscar Wilde

Composers, like all creative artists, are forever devising ways to make their art pay, so that they can devote their time to creating it. And, as a recent series of interviews attest, composers are tremendously inventive in assembling the wherewithal to pursue their visions.

There are those few whose careers seem fated for success from the start—publishers and agents pick them up right out of school, introduce them to decision-makers, put them forward for plum assignments, negotiate their fees, promote their projects. All at once, their names seem to pop up everywhere. But it is important to know that these are not the only composers making a living. None of the composers interviewed here fits that description. If your definition of success as a composer includes a measure of artistic achievement—after all, many of the most admired composers of the past century have found success more in artistic breakthroughs than in amassing riches—then the voices here are all successful, and growing more successful by finding their own way.

I spoke with these five diverse composers (and I make six) about the role that commissions play in their professional income; the sources of funds; and the impact commissions can have on their actual work. They are all active and productive, and range from emerging to career peak. They work, variously, in orchestral, choral, and electronic music; opera and music theatre; all along the spectrum up and down and across town. In these conversations, I pledged not to disclose figures in order to protect the composers' current

negotiations and to avoid any implied value ranking; and in general not to mention musicians or organizations involved in their anecdotes.

The interviews, in alphabetical order:

1. About Du Yun, see:
<<http://channelduyun.com>>
(accessed May 6, 2016).
2. About Matthew Harris, see:
<<http://matthewharrismusic.com>>
(accessed May 6, 2016).
3. About Louis Karchin, see:
<www.louiskarchin.com>
(accessed May 6, 2016).
4. About Angélica Negrón, see:
<<http://angelicanegron.com>>
(accessed May 6, 2016).
5. About Robert Sirota, see:
<www.robertsirota.com>
(accessed May 6, 2016).
6. About me, see:
<www.theodrewiprud.com>
(accessed May 6, 2016).

- Du Yun¹
- Matthew Harris²
- Louis Karchin³
- Angélica Negrón⁴
- Robert Sirota⁵
- Theodore Wiprud⁶

* * *

What are the components of composers' incomes?

- Composers get paid when their music is licensed for live performance. This income, including the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI), the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada (SOCAN), and similar licensing organizations, can amount to something when large pieces get many performances; not so much for solo and small ensemble music. Opera and dramatic performances get paid through “grand rights,” which can be large or small depending on negotiating power and the size of the presenting organization.
- Composers get paid when recordings of their music are sold or downloaded or streamed, but as is well known, this income stream has shrunk to almost nothing in the age of Spotify.
- Composers sell and rent sheet music, scores, and parts to musicians, either in print or by download. They may do so by contract with a publisher or (increasingly) as their own publisher. This can amount to something when large pieces like orchestra works are rented out regularly. Sales, like choral scores and solo sheet music, generally yield less, even in large volumes.
- And, of course, composers can receive commissions—fees for composing music in the first place. Depending on your career stage and your niche in the ecosystem, your commissions can range from inconsequential to very consequential; from token expressions of appreciation, to the basis of a true livelihood. My interviews included statements like “it’s probably not the most important income stream,” and others like “it’s now my primary source of income.”

Many professional composers would probably agree with Matthew Harris when he says that the mix of his own income from these sources varies from year to year—in some years it’s mostly commissions, in other years, mostly performance royalties.

Finally, and not to be overlooked, there are associated kinds of paying work that nourish and are nourished by a composer’s training. These include performing, often in one’s own projects, like Du Yun; teaching, at the university level like Louis Karchin, or pre-college like Angélica Negrón; and arts administration, in my own case as well as Robert Sirota’s. All of these can connect composers with performance opportunities and sources of commission money. All can help complete a larger deal that involves a commission.

* * *

“To commission music means to pay a composer to write a particular composition for a specific purpose or event. Anyone can commission music, and any type of music can be commissioned.” So says *Commissioning Music: A Basic Guide* (New York, Meet the Composer, Inc., 1995). Initially published in the 1980s, then updated in the 1990s by me, and several times since then, this guide continues to be available through New Music USA, the organization that resulted from the merger of Meet The Composer with the American Music Center.⁷ There are many other resources available online, including a workable commissioning contract template.⁸ All aspects are negotiable, but the cited template touches on all the major points.

The *Commissioning Music* guide came up in nearly every conversation I had. Composers find it not only a trustworthy source of information, but also a useful tool when it comes to talking money. Matthew Harris calls it “the Blue Book” (as in the essential pricing guide for cars),⁹ and says it helps the conversation move toward an equitable deal. The guide provides wide ranges of fees for specific types of music, in recognition of different composers’ ability to command fees. As the editor of one edition, I can attest that it is based on many conversations with composers at many career stages. The numbers are not merely aspirational; they reflect the range that real composers are really earning, today, in the US. (Updates are constantly needed to keep up with the marketplace. For instance, Angélica Negrón points out that the guide should provide more information on fees for electronic music, alone or in ensemble.)

Ultimately a commission means money changing hands—unless it does not. Sometimes we composers just want to take a project. Sometimes we

7. About New Music USA, see: <www.newmusicusa.org> (accessed May 6, 2016). The Commissioning Music guide is available for downloading at: <www.newmusicusa.org/about/resources> (accessed May 6, 2016).
8. See: <<http://forum.makemusic.com/attach.aspx/18462/ContractforCommissionedMusicForm.pdf>> (accessed May 6, 2016).
9. See: <www.kbb.com> (accessed May 6, 2016).

just want to compose, more than we want to write grants. Sometimes the promise of multiple performances outweighs the lack of funds up front. As Angélica Negrón says, “If it’s someone I really want to write for, I’ll make it work.” She refers to such deals as *symbolic* commissions. *In-kind* is another term—at least we do not have to pay the musicians or rent the hall. But my favorite term, provided by Matthew Harris, was *Platonic commissions*. Immaculate, free of the taint of cash.

Immaculate or not, whether or not a non-cash transaction should be referred to as a commission at all is debatable. On the one hand, it is undeniably good for a young composer’s resume to list commissions, because further and better paying commissions are more likely to come to those who can demonstrate a history of being paid for their work. On the other hand, calling a freebie a commission gives the artist or organization credit for largesse they have not demonstrated. As well, a commission often comes with exclusivity—the right to perform it during a certain period to the exclusion of other artists. (And the longer an artist or ensemble has exclusive performance rights, the higher a commission fee should be.) Calling the work a commission can discourage other performers. For these reasons, when I do compose without fee, I credit the artist or ensemble with the premiere, and if it is true, I say that the work was composed for them, and I possibly even dedicate it to them—but I do not use the word “commissioned.”

Platonic commissions may occur more in the early parts of our careers, but not exclusively so. In recent years, although I have a long history of receiving commissions, I have agreed to write pieces up to about five minutes long for soloists or small ensembles, for the promise of many performances, which indeed have come about. Not only do the performance licensing payments add up, but I have found that working with the musicians over many performances enriches relationships that lead to paying commissions for more substantial pieces.

On the other hand, most of the composers I interviewed feel strongly that there should always be at least a token commission—a recognition that the composer is a professional providing a quality service. If musicians get paid, composers should get paid. And as Negrón says, it’s refreshing when it’s part of the first conversation. “The composer shouldn’t have to bring it up.”

“The more important a piece is for your career, the less important the commission fee is,” says Matthew Harris. “If it’s a one-off type of project, then the commission is very important. You want to be paid adequately.”

Then there are long-term projects—like operas—that are nearly impossible to get funded without some of the work already done. If the creative impulse,

the vision, is sufficiently compelling, a composer may invest years of work in a project before money even becomes possible.

Matthew Harris recalls his experience with his opera *Tess* (2000). “I could have worked five years to raise the money, or I could have composed for those five years.” So he composed, and as it developed, different people came forward to pay for different parts of the project. Choruses from the opera were published separately. In the end it all came together and paid reasonably well. Du Yun reports a similar experience with her recent opera *Angel’s Bone* (2011, 2015). Originally a chamber piece, the conception grew with the addition of librettist Royce Vavrek, and then the Trinity Wall Street Choir, until it became irresistible to the Prototype Festival, which finally provided the commission and a premiere production.

* * *

There are many sources of funds for commissions.¹⁰ To the traditional sources—public funds, foundations, and individuals—may now be added crowdfunding. Kickstarter, in fact, recently eclipsed the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)¹¹ as a source of arts funding.¹²

Let’s take a quick look at the state of these sources in the United States today. Public funds include grants from NEA’s ArtWorks program, which accepts applications from organizations seeking to commission (among other activities). There are also some state-level and local-level programs. Some of these focus mostly on public art—art that aims to improve neighborhood quality of life. But the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA)¹³ has for 30 years provided artist fellowships, which amount to no-strings commission or production money that the composer can apply for directly.

Foundations include many that advertise their support for commissioning music—Koussevitsky, Barlow, Ditson, Fromm, and the like have annual application deadlines open to organizations. Service organizations like Chamber Music America¹⁴ and New Music USA aggregate funds from foundations like these and then accept applications from composers or organizations for chunks of those funds.¹⁵

When you get one of these grants, the organization often backs your project with at least online publicity. It’s a feather in the ensemble’s cap and yours. However, six months is a typical wait between application deadline and notification. Because they are highly competitive, and their decision-making panels are unpredictable, you usually apply to many of these programs over a period of time. None may come through. This is fine if you have plenty of other pieces

10. For a fairly comprehensive history of USA funding for commissions and other new music activities, see my hyperhistory on the subject, from 2000, “On the Money: New Music Funding in the United States”:

<www.newmusicbox.org/articles/On-the-Money-New-Music-Funding-in-the-United-States> (accessed March 10, 2016).

11. About NEA, see: <www.arts.gov> (accessed May 6, 2016).

12. See here: <www.newmusicbox.org/articles/art-and-democracy-the-nea-kickstarter-and-creativity-in-america> (accessed March 10, 2016).

13. About NYFA, see: <www.nyfa.org> (accessed May 6, 2016).

14. About Chamber Music America, see: <www.chamber-music.org> (accessed May 6, 2016).

15. There is a good updated (but not exhaustive) list of these at: <www.peabody.jhu.edu/conservatory/mecc/funding_resources_for_composers.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2016). Most of these are generalized national programs. More can be found with a diligent Google search, including many that target particular regions or kinds of projects.

to write, but personally, I dislike putting my artistic progress at the mercy of factors outside my control. Many composers do well by applying consistently. It may be that some composers' work is more panel-friendly than others'.

There are also private foundations—often family foundations that do not publish guidelines, that do not want it known that they have commissioned music, lest they receive applications. Such foundations often turn out to stand behind offers from individuals. They have to distribute a certain percentage of their assets each year, and if your project comes along at the right time, it can serve your purposes and theirs.

Then there are individuals themselves—modern patrons of the arts. Wealthy individuals are actually the mainstay of most artistic endeavors in the United States, today as in the past, as you will see if you examine the annual report of any medium to large US arts institution. Board members making their annual minimum gift; patrons in the “conductor’s circle” or similarly named top echelons contributing in the four or five figures annually; “friends” giving in the three figures, and of course those major capital campaign gifts—most musical non-profits of any size in the US rely on some combination of these generous people. And the tax code makes it all possible through the deduction for charitable contributions. Individuals hold the real money—orders of magnitude greater than what comes from foundations. (Across all charitable giving, individuals accounted for 72% in 2014.¹⁶) And they generally make their own decisions without the need for a panel of experts. Why should composers not cultivate them today, as they have in ages past?

Some composers can't bring themselves to ask an individual, especially not on their own behalf. But Robert Sirota has made an art of it, drawing on his years as President of Peabody Conservatory and then of Manhattan School of Music. “You’d be surprised how receptive people might be, because they are fascinated by what you do,” he points out. The key, says Sirota, is the project, presented compellingly and concisely. It’s not that you’re an artist and deserve support. You offer people the chance to be part of the next chapter in your career, and that can be very exciting.

Individuals do not even need to be especially wealthy to take part in commissions—just passionate about music in general or your project in particular. Folks can team up to support a commission, either one special time, or as an ongoing club activity. I myself have achieved rewarding commissions by recruiting one person capable of providing a good chunk, who then invites friends to join her. And what is crowdfunding but a system for engaging many small donors?

16. See: <www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics> (accessed May 6, 2016).

Several composers noted that commissions tend to be larger when they originate with the artist or organization; and especially when someone other than the composer negotiates the fee. Most composers, unless they have a steady stream of paying work, are just so committed by nature to continuing to compose, they do not ask as much as they could. Someone representing you can probably make the case more clearly and hold the line on money.

As well, there are many stories of composers getting more opportunities when they raise their prices. This was Robert Sirota's experience when he left academic administration to freelance full time. In our commercial culture, value is associated with price. Your music might sound better to those who commission, when it commands more money in the marketplace.

At the same time, performances drive interest, whether influential people attend them or are simply aware of the activity. Making it easy for lots of groups to perform your music certainly helps launch a career. And composing lots of music, without pause, certainly hones your craft and clarifies your voice.

This is the dilemma faced by composers setting out to develop professional careers—establishing a healthy, paying balance between supply and demand.

* * *

Ideally, those who wish to commission us—artists and organizations—do the legwork with one or more of these sources. But the composer who has skills and experience submitting grants, setting up a Kickstarter campaign, or hitting up individual donors has a distinct advantage (other things being equal). In cases where I approach artists or ensembles about working together, I sometimes offer to help raise the money. That's part of what I bring to the table. The upside of this is that I make it easy for artists and ensembles to say yes. The downside is that by taking even partial responsibility for the money, I have to be flexible on the outcome.

Robert Sirota makes a point of separating money for music copying from his commission fee—even if he actually prepares parts himself. Somebody needs to be paid to do that work, and the commissioning party does not need to know who's doing it. This is a good way to avoid the situation that some other composers related, of spending most of the commission fee on copying. Certainly we should make those who approach us for commissions aware that copying is a significant expense distinct from the time and talent invested in composing.

Commissions are of course not confined to concert music and opera. Du Yun reports a much higher scale among theatres in New York—

Broadway and Off-Broadway—where money comes from investors, not donors. Museums have paid her on a higher scale as well. The best, says Angélica Negrón, are film music and commercials. Since she works with electronic music, she can provide a completed product relatively quickly, on her own schedule, and make changes as necessary. And if a commercial's use is extended, she gets paid again. This is work she began while in school in Puerto Rico, and that she goes back there to do, in addition to work now coming her way in New York.

Those who teach at research universities—like Louis Karchin at New York University (NYU)—are expected to compose (“do research”) as part of their jobs. Funds are available to them for the purpose of realizing their projects. At NYU, he says, these funds can be paid to anyone other than himself, and as such are tax free. While this money is thus not for commission fees *per se*, it applies to mounting concerts and making recordings—projects that a commission fee might have gone to support. In Karchin's eyes, the university is his biggest patron. With so many productive composers holding university posts, it would be interesting to compile the financial impact these institutions have on actual composing and the performance and recording of new music.

* * *

Can a commission influence the creative process? My interviews provided a range of answers to this question, but everyone started by saying that the most important influence is the confidence resulting from being treated professionally, the motivation to provide a high-quality work of art. Sometimes a request comes for a piece, or on a text, that a composer does not feel interested in or capable of. Robert Sirota counsels seeking common ground in this situation. What is the commissioning party's goal? How can you as a composer help fulfill that? If no satisfying solution results, then politely decline.

Sirota adds that one way of saying no is to quote an extremely high price. If the offer is somehow accepted, then at least it helps to pay for projects you value more highly, that may not pay as well.

No one reported feeling creatively constrained by any commission they carried out. As Du Yun says, artists and organizations know her work by the time they approach her; they have a good idea what they are going to get. At the same time, she feels it's only right to respect an audience and its cultural milieu. Some projects fit one market, some are for another—something she thinks about in relation to projects in her native China. But it's a matter of choosing the project, not watering down the music.

Undoubtedly the selection of a text for vocal or dramatic music can prove tricky. A text gives concrete meaning to the work, unlike more abstract, purely musical expressions. Time to seek common ground. And possibly, time to open up to a new influence. Matthew Harris recalls being commissioned for a Christmas choral concert—for a secular piece. Uninterested in reindeer and tinsel, struggling for a way to fulfill the task, he stumbled on the idea of treating Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (1955). It proved to be an important piece for him that opened many doors.

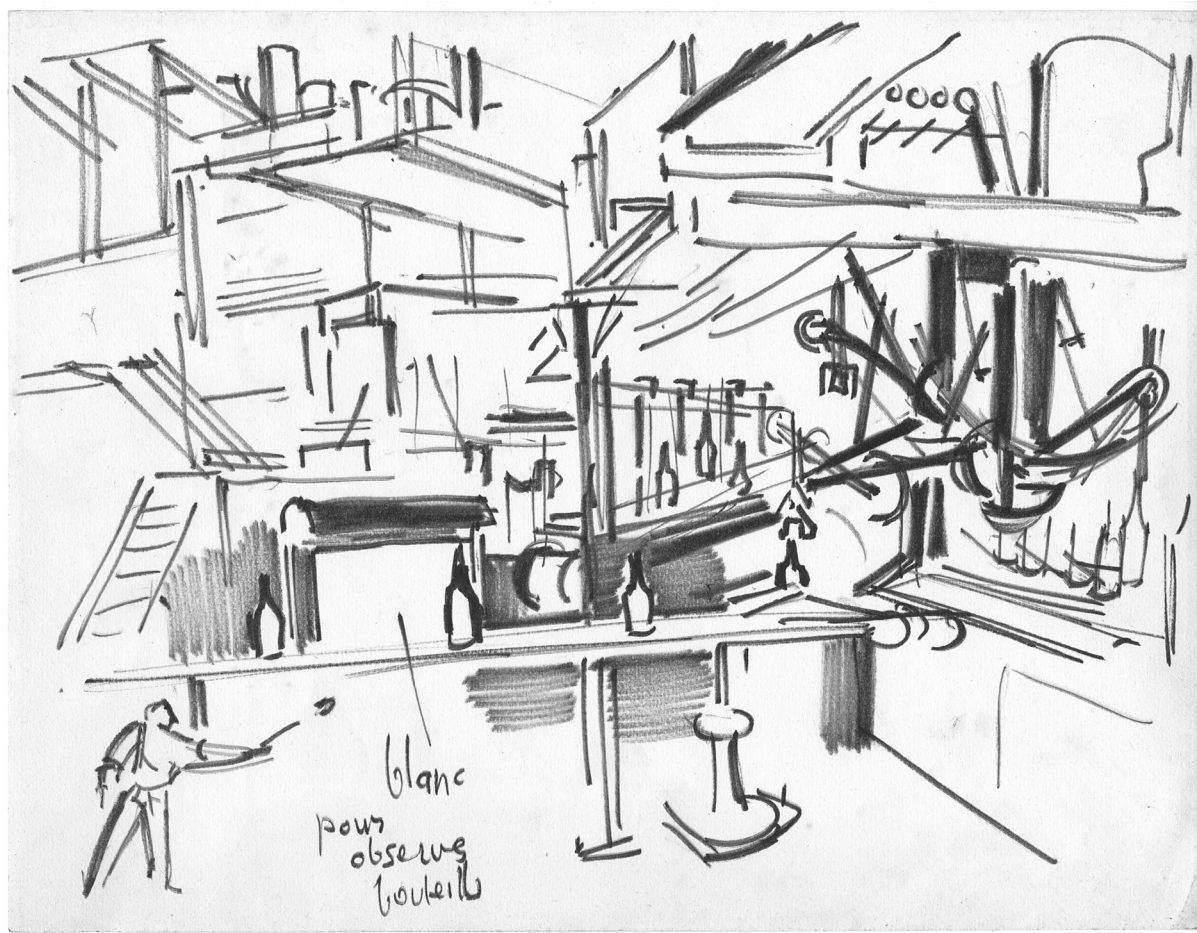
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If I discovered anything in this investigation, it is that every composer thinks about commission fees differently depending on his or her place in the musical world. For Louis Karchin in academe, his employer is the biggest patron, and commission fees are important but not critical. For Du Yun, performance fees are part of the mix, and also multiple venues outside concert music, with their different fee levels. For Angélica Negrón, commercial activity helps take up the slack as she enters competitions and applies for grants in the first part of a promising career. For Matthew Harris, a full time, mid-career composer with a large catalog of choral, vocal, and chamber music, there's an e-fluctuating mix of income streams. Robert Sirota, who recently left Manhattan School of Music with the skills and connections accumulated throughout a career leading educational institutions, commissions are now the primary source of income.

Sirota asks, "How can we spend years of our lives and hundreds of thousands of dollars on our training, and then spend not a cent on monetization?" He has found that employing others to negotiate, pursue projects, and publicize his work not only enables him to spend more time composing, but also to increase his fees and frequency of performance more than enough to pay these freelance helpers. All the services of the old-fashioned music publisher are now available on a DIY basis, through the wonders of technology, but also through freelance publicists and agents. It's a new and still-evolving ecosystem. Composers are among those generating value. We bring capital into the system. At some point, we can afford some skilled helpers whether or not they work for a music publisher.

My own approach to a new piece is to maximize its value in every way. After all, I have only so many productive years ahead of me. A healthy commissioning fee is wonderful and truly inspiring. But it's not more important to me than pushing myself to a new artistic level with each new work; and

giving an outstanding artist or ensemble something they will absolutely love playing and singing, again and again, so that they will want to commission me again, and more ambitiously. If one day I am once again full time. freelance composing, I may think differently. It all depends how you mix your own cocktail of professional income.



Reynold Arnoult, *Fabrication de bouteilles* (Saint-Gobain, usine de Vauxrot), 1957-1958. Dessin au feutre, 24,2 × 31,2 cm. Droits réservés.