Canadian Music in Education - Patricia Shand

As Director of the John Adaskin Project, I am often asked for advice from teachers who are interested in commissioning a composer to write a new work for their students.

Suggestions for Teachers Wanting to Commission a Composer to Write for Student Performers

I would suggest that teachers applying to an arts council, foundation or other organization for a commissioning grant emphasize the following points:

1. the need for Canadian students to develop a sense of their national cultural heritage
2. the exciting opportunity for teachers and students to work first-hand with a creative artist
3. the advantage to the composer of working directly with students and teachers in order to discover the capabilities of young performers
4. the adaptability of the commissioned work to other school situations (i.e., the commission will contribute to the available repertoire for other schools rather than being a ‘one performance only’ affair).

It is quite possible that there are composers in your own community who could be approached informally so that you can discover which composers are interested in writing for student performers, and whether or not such composers would have time to undertake such a commission.

When applying for a grant you will have to be specific about the length of the work and the type of performing medium (e.g., full band, string orchestra, SATB choir, brass quintet, etc.) I would recommend a short work, say 3 to 5 minutes, since short works tend to gain wider acceptance among teachers than longer works. You should get an estimate from the composer of his or her fee, and you should apply for funds to cover the costs of copying and reproducing the score and parts. If the commissioned piece is to be premiered at a music education workshop or some other prominent community function, this should be indicated on the grant application. Granting agencies generally like to have a wide exposure for a new work. Try to be as specific as possible in your application so that the granting agency knows who the composer, students and teacher(s) will be; what length of piece and performing medium; why you are undertaking the commissioning project; when and where the composer will work with the students and teacher(s) and when and where the premiere performance will take place.

Once you have received a commissioning grant, I would suggest that you consult with the composer you have chosen, describing the technical capabilities of your students and any specific requirements you may have (e.g., clarinets are weak this year, so long exposed clarinet passages should be avoided). Before the composer begins to work, he or she might like to meet and listen to the students who will be performing the new piece. The composer, teacher and students would also benefit from working together during the rehearsal process. The composer can explain the desired effects, the teacher and students can explain specific problems which they may be encountering, and revisions to the score can be made if necessary. It can be exciting for students and teachers to feel themselves a part of the creative process.

If you need additional advice about commissioning, contact me by mail at the Canadian Music Centre, 20 St. Joseph St., Toronto, ON M4Y 1J9, or by e-mail: pshand@chass.utoronto.ca