



WATER WEARING STONE

PRACTICAL MATTERS
OF CLASSICAL-GUITAR
COMPOSITION

BY JOHN W. WARREN

Above all, a composer *creates*. But today's composers must nevertheless navigate many other issues, including commissions, licensing and copyright, distribution and digital streaming, and on and on. In Bach's day, it might have been easier: Toiling in obscurity and poverty, or gaining fame—if not riches—many composers labored under the patronage of wealthy and influential benefactors. Then again, Bach didn't have the option of sending a performer MIDI files via Dropbox. Composers in the 21st century have many options, although most of us will still be unlikely, except under near-miraculous circumstances, to receive rich recompense for our work. Composing can be rewarding and worthwhile in itself, of course, but whether you're an established or aspiring composer, attention to practical aspects and business details may have a great influence over your ultimate success.

COMPOSITION IS NOT A SOLO SPORT

Commissions are central to both the creative output and the earnings of many composers. Paying composers to write a new piece for a specific purpose or event can be undertaken by anyone motivated to support a composer and champion a new piece of music. Stephen Goss, one of the most renowned composers for the contemporary classical guitar, emphasizes this point. "All my work is commissioned and has been for the last 25 years or so," says the Welsh composer. "Would I write music if I had no commissions? Almost certainly not—for me composing is a social process, not a private one. If I'm not collaborating with someone on a project that has an endpoint—performances and/or a recording—then I'm not composing."

Communication and give-and-take are essential. "The most important thing to remember is that commissioners are paying for something that they want," continues Goss. "Getting as clear an idea of what that is might not always be easy, but it's central to success. Both sides need to manage each other's expectations. I've learned that the challenge is to be as creative as possible while sticking closely to the brief."

Obtaining commissions is a gradual process facilitated by awards, grants, and social endeavors. "Winning composition prizes in Europe led to my first commissions," states Javier Farias, a Chilean composer currently based in the United States, who was first-place winner of the Andrés

Segovia (Spain) and the Michele Pittaluga and Concorso 2 de Agosto (both in Italy) composition competitions. "Relocating to the U.S. allowed me to find more opportunities because of the great interest from both institutions and individuals to get involved commissioning new music. This is important because there must exist a close relationship and collaboration between the performer and the composer." In his case, recent commissions include the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard University, Meet the Composer (New Music USA), San Francisco Conservatory Guitar Ensemble, Carnegie Hall, and Apollo Chamber Players.

For Goss, conferences and festivals are critical, particularly the Guitar Foundation of America (GFA) convention. "I think composers have to get out there—to be seen, to meet people, to talk to people, and to share ideas in formal and informal social situations," he says. "Composers have to be careful not to bombard people with self-promotion, however, and nothing is less appealing than a composer who drones on endlessly about their latest pet composition projects. Festivals have a two-fold function—to meet, talk, and share ideas with people who might play or listen to my music, and to hear the music that other composers are writing. The GFA convention is always a fantastic event, with seemingly limitless networking opportunities, inspiring concerts, and thought-provoking lectures."

For prominent Swiss composer Jürg Kindle, commissions have played a less central role, yet opportunities for collaboration are still beneficial. "Many people think that as a well-known composer I get a lot of commissions; unfortunately, however, these are very few," admits Kindle. "My works have all come from my own initiative. Of course, it's something special when you can write for a specific ensemble—the motivation and inspiration is much higher. Instead, I receive inquiries for lectures, seminars, or workshops. These are always good opportunities to keep in touch with the guitar world."

FREEDOM IN RESTRICTIONS

Paradoxically, the inherent boundaries imposed by commissions may benefit a composer. "In a way, the more restrictions I'm given, the more creative I can be," says Goss. "I enjoy working on very prescriptive commissions. The hardest pieces to write are the ones when the commissioner

says 'Do whatever you want to do.' Deadlines are also very important to my compositional process—they focus the mind and enable compositional decisions to be made. My composing life is thus a series of deadlines."

Considerable freedom is still bestowed on the composer. "When you get a commission, the stakeholder paying for it knows plenty about the kind of music you compose, so generally few limitations are imposed regarding a certain style," Farias remarks. "You need to reach agreement ahead of time regarding the specifics of instrumentation and the length of the work. In my case, most commissions involve writing music for guitar in combination with other instruments: choir, string quartets, orchestras, etc."

"Some projects are highly experimental—others involve less risk-taking," Goss adds. "These aspects are governed by the commissioner. I have learned a great deal from the artists I work with. Every artist brings something different to the collaborative process—they will all want different levels of input. I think it's important to be sensitive to this and be ready to be flexible and adaptive. When working with a soloist, there's usually a lot of room for trial and error; if I am writing for orchestra, the piece needs to play directly from the page. You can't turn up to an orchestral rehearsal with any ambiguities in your score."

TOWARD THE URTEXT

Instruction and composition are interlinked for Jürg Kindle, leading in no small part to his renown. "In the early '80s, very little educational literature was available for guitar, so at first, I wrote music for my students purely because I needed something useful," he relates. "In 35 years as a guitar teacher, my most important learning experiences have come at music schools. I've tried out all my pieces in my own teaching—they work because they've been thought out didactically and derive from practice."

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COMPOSERS ON COMPOSING

jürg kindle

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PUBLISH OR PERISH

Composers can utilize a publishing company to make their work available in manuscript form, but as with book publishing, many are turning to the possibilities of self-publishing. "Having your music published is a good strategy to help your music get better known," says Farias, but cautions, "Nevertheless most composers aren't going to see much in terms of royalties, unless you are very successful or publishing pedagogical materials."

Goss also warns, "While it's flattering to be offered the chance to have one's music published, not all publishers offer the same things, and there are many pitfalls. My main advice is to get legal support before signing a contract, and to have a full and frank discussion with your prospective publisher about precisely what it is they can offer you. There's also a great deal to be said for self-publishing, now that distribution's easier through the internet. Having said that, I am very happy with my current publisher, Doberman-Yppan. The company is efficient, helpful, and professional and takes care of many things I don't have time for—professional typesetting, distribution, sales, promotion, etc."

Eric Dussault of the tandem Canadian music publishing giants Les Productions d'OZ and Doberman-Yppan offers some practical guidance for aspiring composers: "It's not necessarily easy for composers starting out to find a publisher. Most traditional publishing houses are doing fewer publications and avoid risks. Nevertheless, I think the best thing for composers is to get his or her music played."

Goss notes, "For me, it's felt like water gradually wearing away a stone, a combination of many factors, in having my compositions become more widely known. Performances, however, are probably the most important thing."

Whether self-publishing or working with a publisher like d'Oz, nearly all composers also utilize personal websites and social media channels to expose their work more widely and to connect with performers, commissioners, and other audiences. Still, this is no substitute for personal interaction. "I always advise my composition students to get to know as many people as possible face to face—attending festivals,

that it's important to inhabit the performer's musical worldview—to see things from their perspective," Goss says. "I've learned to always try to write music that is totally bespoke for the person or people who are going to perform it first. I'll make every effort to get to know their playing well, and try to write music that fits their hands. Performance context is very important. Consequently, I have written very different guitar music for people like John Williams, David Russell, and Xuefei Yang."

Kindle agrees: "Collaboration with performers, or working with guitar orchestras on their own pieces, are joyful moments. If you succeed in accurately capturing the technical and musical level of the performers, find the appropriate story for them, encapsulate it in body, mind, and soul, and satisfy an audience, the wonderful loop between your idea and its realization is fulfilled."

Farias recommends using today's technologies to facilitate collaboration. "For world premiere performances or record-

ings, I'll send the musicians some MIDI files of the new work. Some musicians may not need or prefer this, but in my experience, it's proved helpful in imparting in the performers more confidence in performing new music."

Goss echoes the importance of enabling performers to feel comfortable in performing new pieces. "Making sure that a soloist feels comfortable onstage with the technical and musical challenges of a piece is crucial, particularly if you want many repeat performances," he says. "My music is not easy to play, but it's not unreasonably difficult. I've learned that a piece needs to be the right length, style, and level of complexity for each performer who commissions me. I also like to spend time with the performer trying to find elegant solutions for technical and musical problems that might exist in the first draft of my piece. We tend to work toward the best version, rather than away from an immaculate conception, or perfect 'original.' An urtext is something we work toward, not away from."

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Javier Farias

concerts, competitions and other events," says Goss. "Once people have had some social interaction with you, they are much more likely to take note if they hear a piece of yours in a concert, or see a post on Facebook or YouTube."

Kindle, for one, has found greater economic success and other rewards from the self-publishing route. "I worked with international publishers for 30 years, while teaching 40 to 60 guitar students every week to make a living, composing at night, on weekends, and during holidays. Not to denigrate publishers—because I owe them my broad recognition—but they've never resulted in an economic boom for me: royalties from my 80 publications barely pay the telephone bill. Self-publishing has become more rewarding—I have direct contact with those who order my work and receive feedback from them. My imprint, Edition Kalimba, is now one year old. It's been a challenge, but it's exciting and I'm responsible for my own economic success."

Even d'Oz's Dussault recommends self-publishing as a viable option. "We see more and more composers today able to handle their repertoire by themselves," says the Québec-based publisher. For this

reason and others, d'OZ offers typesetting and printing services to clients. "Some composers prefer to have complete control over their copyrights and production. Today's aspiring composers should learn the basics of self-publishing, copyrights, and mechanical rights."

RIGHTS AND MECHANICALS

As a composer, you're owed money whenever the music you've written is recorded, streamed, performed in public, or used on a film or TV soundtrack. Composers can retain, license, and even sell rights to their work. Under U.S. copyright law, while it's not required to register your work, it's certainly wise to do so, especially in the case that you'd need to bring a lawsuit for copyright infringement. Publishers will often register copyrights—and prefer to do so in the publisher's own name, but this can be negotiated. In the U.S., composers can register their own copyrights at eco.copyright.gov, either as notated scores or audio recordings, or both. (Registration of musical works is either as sound recordings, i.e., a CD or for streaming, or as work of the performing arts—if both, the applicant reg-

isters the work as a sound recording.)

Each country has different copyright laws and agencies; thus, composers and publishers must also consider whether to protect the copyrighted work in multiple territories. For example, if a Norwegian composer's work is likely to be recorded and performed in the U.S., he or she may want to register copyrights in both territories. Composers can also consider using a Creative Commons license to share their work while protecting their copyright.

Music licensing is the process of obtaining permission to utilize a copyrighted work in a film, TV program, ad, audio recording, digital download, etc. Again, there is a distinction between the licensing of the *musical composition*—the melodic, harmonic, and percussive components—and a *sound recording*—an artist's recorded performance of a composition. A composer who records his or her own compositions may license both the composition and performance, and at least in theory be compensated for uses of both.

Four distinct types of musical licenses come into play. A **synchronization** license (or "synch" license) entails the right to synchronize a musical composition timed with



visual content, such as in a YouTube video or film soundtrack, and the ability to reproduce that content. These licenses are generally one-time flat fees ranging from nominal amounts to thousands of dollars, depending on the specific rights needed, budget, and relative leverage of the negotiating parties.

Mechanical licenses authorize the manufacture, reproduction, and distribution of audio-only recordings (vinyl, CD, downloads). A performer recording an instance of your composition is therefore required to seek a mechanical license, typically through a licensing agency. If a composition has been previously recorded, “compulsory” licensing provisions mandate standard royalty rates to be paid to the copyright holder. A **public performance** license permits performance or broadcast of a musical composition or sound recording, such as a concert performance of your piece.

Finally, a **master use** license confers the right to fix a master recording in a specific media and make copies for a flat fee or per-unit royalty (record labels typically own masters). This type of license would be invoked if, say, a producer wanted to use a Jason Vieaux recording of your composition as opposed to Pablo Villegas’ recording, for a TV commercial. “Fair use” exceptions to copyright allow use for educational purposes under certain circumstances.

Composers can register with a performing rights organization (PRO), which represent songwriters and publishers by negotiating blanket licenses to broad-

casters, restaurants and bars, and other places where music is used in public, then collecting fees and distributing them to registered songwriters and publishers as performance royalties. In the U.S., PROs include Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI); the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP); and SESAC, Inc. When registering with a PRO, a composer also needs to determine whether to register only as a songwriter or also as a publisher—separate rights are conferred and fees collected for each.

PROs also vary by territory. Productions d’OZ works with SOCAN and SODRAC in Canada; Goss is a member of the Performing Rights Society in the UK; Kindle with SUISA (Cooperative Society of Music Authors and Publishers in Switzerland); Farias with ASCAP; and I am registered as a publisher and songwriter with BMI, for performance royalties and mechanical rights.

WIFM

Composers, Farias maintains, are compelled to create from an almost irrepressible personal artistic impulse. But from a financial standpoint, a composer may wonder “what’s in it for me?” For Goss and Farias, important sources of income from composition are commission fees and grants.

“It’s not a sensible way to try and make a living,” admits Goss. “Even after 30 years writing professionally, the financial return is limited. I charge a daily rate and then work out how long the piece will take to write and work out a commission fee that

way. My daily rate is equivalent to that of a bricklayer or plasterer. Things are different for people working in more commercial or applied areas of composition, but still not easy. The more artistic control you desire, the less you’re likely to earn.”

In addition to understanding copyrights and licensing issues, composers should consult with a financial or tax advisor about the tax implications of composing. A composer may, for example, deduct expenses such as copyright registrations, PRO membership fees, website costs, and other expenses against income from mechanical licenses or publishing royalties.

Not surprisingly, most composers supplement their income through teaching or other means. “Composing is my vocation,” says Kindle, “but it’s only possible thanks to my profession as a guitar teacher. It is an illusion to believe you could live by composing. My economic situation led me to set up my publishing company; a few books sold from Edition Kalimba bring in more than a year’s worth of other royalties. I’m proud that, together with my full-time job as a guitar teacher, I had the energy to build my portfolio over the years. I view this today as a privilege; it’s wonderful to be able to motivate many young guitarists with my music and connect with professional musicians around the world.”

John W. Warren is a publisher whose recording Serenata de la Sirena includes nine of his own compositions.