



Good Housekeeping for Composers:

*Some Thoughts on
Personal Administration*

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Does anyone ever really know what it will be like to have a career as a composer? A clear picture of what day-to-day life will look like? An approximate trajectory of how one might achieve fame, wealth, and glory? Probably not.



Growing up on Prince Edward Island, I do not recall meeting a living composer of art music until I went away to university, so I was never really aware that it was even a “career choice”, let alone what it would look like. When it came barging into my imagination during my undergraduate degree, I started fantasizing about what it might be like to be a “Composer”. Naturally, my initial perception was based on unrealistic standards of success: regular orchestral premieres, blockbuster film scores, travelling the world, those benefits enjoyed by a select number of popular composers. As you might imagine, at the current stage in my career this perception has changed and developed remarkably.

There are many interesting facets to fashioning a career in composing in Canada, but the one in which I am particularly interested is the topic of personal administration; put otherwise, how composers learn to manage their own careers, mostly by trial and error. In my roles as a composer, artistic director, and administrator, I have done quite a bit of that trial and error myself, always wondering whether I should have picked up this knowledge in some more formal way. While going through their training, most composers focus on developing their creative craft by writing pieces, taking classes in orchestration and counterpoint, participating in workshops, and forming friendships with like-minded composers and performers. This makes sense—university is a special time where composers can take musical risks with little or no repercussions. However, after leaving the academic nest, composers have a myriad of lessons left to learn regarding managing their own careers, including how to best represent themselves on paper, online, and in person. This is where things get interesting and frightening: a composer might be able to write harmonics for the double bass, but are they on top of grant deadlines, competitions and workshop applications, their website, and all of the important premieres of their peers?

To be honest, even the most organized, obsessive-compulsive composer probably carries around a fair amount of what I will call “administration guilt”, a consequence of an ever-expanding to-do list. For many composers I talk to, keeping personal websites up-to-date is on the top of that list. For others, it might be notifying SOCAN of performances, or finally becoming a SOCAN member, as the case may be. My greatest challenge is the ongoing and almost dizzying (albeit enticing!) array of opportunities and applications that pop up: grant applications, composer competitions, workshops, and calls for works.

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To apply or not to apply? It can be a tough question at times, where a composer must weigh the front-end work (putting together materials, the cost of printing scores, the cost of application fees in some cases) with the risk of being rejected, and all that work done seemingly for nothing. My overarching philosophy in these situations is that it is better to apply, regardless of the outcome. Even if an application is unsuccessful, it will act as a form of advertisement for the composer and their music. If individual members of the jury or committee enjoy a composer’s music, there may be tangential benefits since juries often consist of other composers and established artists. These kinds of applications should be a priority for composers, and time should be budgeted each year for these exercises. Having said that, I still have to pick and choose opportunities that resonate with what I do as a composer and artist, and also factor what I can do within →

my own personal contexts of time, work and money. These variables are common for all composers, and they will impact the amount and variety of administration that can be undertaken.

Ontario composers have a number of exciting granting possibilities at their disposal. For instance, The Ontario Arts Council's Music Commissioning Program brings the performer/ensemble and composer together in the application process; David Parsons, the OAC Classical Music Officer, reports a fifty percent success rate for their Music Commissioning Program in recent years. In addition, the OAC has been trying to better balance the commissions between emerging and established composers, resulting in a dynamic mix of recipients. The Canada Council for the Arts funds some of the most innovative projects across the country through its Commissioning of Canadian Compositions program; with its high application volume, this program is more competitive, but it is one of the strongest out there. Toronto composers have an additional opportunity through the Toronto Arts Council's Music Creation Grants, which allows some freedom for composers to craft their particular creative projects as these are not commissioning grants. Similar to other opportunities, many composers balk at grant applications—the first application may seem difficult and onerous. However, the administration involved becomes easier with successive applications as a composer becomes more familiar with the format. When scheduling grant applications for these programs, composers should consider contacting the particular granting officer to gain more knowledge about the program.

Composer competitions are a fascinating beast, I must admit. At my day job as the General Manager of the Canadian League of Composers, I manage the monthly newsletter *Zoom In*, which has a section on upcoming events and opportunities, many of which are competitions. I cannot list every competition that comes through the CLC inbox, but I try and include a national and international mix. After two years of compiling (and even more years of looking on my own), a pattern begins to emerge in terms of which competitions and calls will seem attractive to composers. In most cases, it often comes down to how much administrative effort the composer will need to put in to apply. For example, an online application with no fee is very appealing, whereas

asking for a new work with a very specific instrumentation that cannot have had a performance is less so. I think everyone is different in what competitions and calls will pique their interest, but the administrative aspects play a significant role in whether the composer will actually apply. Balancing the time invested in applying with the potential professional reward can be hard to manage; this situation is made easier when there is ample lead time before a competition deadline to allow the composer to make an informed decision and put together the materials.

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An intriguing study on composer competitions was published by the Institute of Applied Cultural Economics and Sociology, which looks at patterns of application criteria, the weighting of monetary reward, and optimizations of duration and instrumentation for competition eligibility. The surprising data from this study shows, among other things, that a 5-7 minute duo will put composers in the most eligible position for the greatest amount of competitions, for the least amount of effort. This makes me wonder whether the applicants and the organizations are equally influenced by administrative effort!

Many of these opportunities require that composers represent themselves as fully as they can on paper, including a CV, biography, works list, and so on. But what about a more recent platform: how do composers best represent themselves online? Does every composer need their own personal website? While many prominent composers get by successfully without a website, it certainly does help increase visibility. Ten years ago, if I wanted to know more about a Canadian composer, I would have had to haul out the big red *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* and look them up. Now, I pretty much assume that every composer I am looking for will be searchable online. This is not always true, of course, even when I add the word “composer” to the end of the search. But when I do find the composer—and they have a website that gives me a peek into their particular context of creativity, and sometimes samples of their music—that feels good; like we have created a new connection. →



When a composer's website has covered the basic questions of who they are, where they have been and what they sound like, I find the next layer quite interesting: how composers choose to represent themselves through subtle self-branding and narrative threads. Sometimes composers find it easier to harness this second layer through social media, keeping their followers apprised of their performances, and sharing pictures and anecdotes related to their works. As an aside, it is worth noting that this aspect of putting yourself out there is easier for some than others—composers tend to be an insular bunch! However, in Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* she addresses the fact that introverts (many composers) may find it easier to promote themselves online than in person. Online promotion is attractive because it combines a sense of contributing to the conversation socially with the magic of solitude, which is a key ingredient in composing.

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Whether a composer is looking sharp on paper and online, it would be foolhardy to underestimate the importance of how they represent themselves in person as part of an artistic community. Even though the actual pencil-on-paper or mouse clicking in Sibelius is mostly done in solitude, one of the most important aspects of being a composer is how they connect to their community. My idea of community has several overlapping layers: from a new music circle made up of other composers and performers; to all different types of audience members; to supportive friends and family. It randomly grows out from there in nebulous ways. It takes effort to keep track of activities within your community, and remain in contact with a growing number of people, but if a composer is supportive it can have an exponential effect on their career: whether they are attending concerts and readings, saying a kind word post-performance, or generally having a good attitude. Not only does it hold benefits for the composer in the future in ways that cannot be predicted, it also helps to create the type of supportive community

that benefits everyone. I am reminded of an amusing and prescient quote from Woody Allen: “eighty percent of success is showing up.” There is some truth to that.

As a final thought, the fact that composers have to figure out the majority share of administrative skills on their own is still a reality, for now. The Canadian League of Composers and the Canadian Music Centre came together in 2010 to address this gap with the Emerging Composer Mentorship Project, where three composers receive actual training and mentorship on some of these professional development aspects. I feel fortunate to have been a part of the administrative team in collaboration with the CMC that put this project together, because I got to have a say in what I thought composers would want to learn more about, from taxation to recording to interdisciplinary collaboration. That felt good.

During those times when I find myself getting lost in the administration related to my composing, I have a couple of people who I can go to for advice and support. It is good for composers to have a couple of those contacts on speed dial (or Gchat, as it were), for when you hit the administrative wall. These can be individuals who are good at proofreading, and who know how to work a budget, but also folks who are unfamiliar with administration but will listen to you vent about your struggles. This is a specialized set of skills within a very specialized career, and we all need a little help now and then.

Although I have since tempered my lofty vision of a career as a composer, I still feel there are opportunities for composers to address the conditions and contexts that shape their livelihoods. Should there be more formal avenues for composers to learn how to manage their careers? I think it would help. For example, the Fine Arts Department of York University trains their students in administration, including taxation and grant-writing, an approach which I hope will become more common across other institutions going forward. In the meantime, composers can use other tools to help each other along the way: knowledge sharing, a good dose of organization, and probably the strongest tool, their own creativity. ■

