Publishing 101
By Josh Gottry

As an established composer with a number of published and self-published works, I often respond to inquiries from emerging composers about the process of moving a composition from completion to publication. Questions include topics such as how to choose a publisher, the pros and cons of self-publication, and what is the best process for submitting a work for consideration. For those individuals looking to publish their first (or even 101st) composition, here are a few thoughts.

WHEN IS IT READY?

Before publishing a piece of music, it is important to be confident in the completed quality of your composition. Just because it has a beginning, middle, and end, doesn’t mean the piece is ready to share with the world. Anybody can self-publish, and just about any piece can be printed and sold, but there are a few things composers can do to determine if their piece is ready.

First, has it been performed, not necessarily in a formal public recital or concert, but has it at least been prepared and played through? If a piece has gone through the process of performance preparation, ideally by someone other than the composer, many notational errors can be identified and fixed, confusing information can be clarified, and missing elements such as tempo markings, phrasing indications, and dynamics can be added. The performing individual or ensemble can also offer thoughts about what portions of the piece were enjoyable to prepare vs. those that were frustrating or not particularly idiomatic, as well as thoughts on the difficulty of the piece and potential edits. If it has been presented in a formal performance, feedback can even be gathered as to the appeal or effectiveness of the composition from an audience perspective.

In addition to the performing ensemble or individual, have you shown the piece to a respected peer or professional in the field to request feedback? Take opportunities to ask questions as to whether this colleague might consider programming a piece of this nature or who this person could see performing the work. If a potential performance scenario for the piece isn’t obvious, that could be a concern worth addressing before publication. These steps to solicit feedback become especially critical when self-publishing because the extra refinements that a publisher may contribute, as a second pair of eyes and ears, are not part of the self-publication process.

Regardless of whether you choose to submit to a publisher or self-publish, the final steps in preparation should include a clean, computer-notated score and parts (hard copy and digital file), program and performance notes and diagrams, and an audio or video recording (either live or quality computer realization). Murray Gusseck, co-founder of Tapspace Productions, LLC., reminds composers that, “The person at the other end (the publisher) has no idea what the composer’s intention is—only what they’ve been given to evaluate,” so be sure to prepare your prints and recordings in the most professional manner possible.

CHOOSING A PUBLISHER

If the score is ready to go, the next most obvious question is whether to submit to a publisher for consideration or to publish it yourself. Brian Nozny, percussion performer, educator, and composer, suggests that composers “should try publishing a few works with a publisher before considering self-publishing. This allows for their name to become recognized and builds up credibility, since a publisher previously showed belief in their compositions.”

Assuming you decide to submit your work to a publisher, how do you decide which company to approach? One thought is to cast the net far and wide by sending a score and CD to every publisher who might consider your music. Numerous potential complications arise with this approach. What if the company you respect the least is the first to respond, or what if the company you like the most is the third or fourth, after you’ve already signed a contract with another publisher? How do you explain to them that you’ve accepted another deal, justify the time they spent reviewing your submission, and hope to have them consider publishing a future composition?

A more professional approach is to make a list of a few publishers for which you feel your piece would be a good fit. After contacting your first choice to ensure they are accepting submissions for publication consideration, prepare a package of materials showcasing your work as professionally as possible. Understand that the review process may take several months or more. It is okay to follow up or check in periodically, but ensure all your contact is courteous and respectful of the publisher’s time. If your first choice passes on the piece, make it a priority to review any feedback you received from their response, and consider any changes or improvements before repeating the submission process with another publisher.

Chris Crockarell, co-founder of Row-Loff Productions, explains that the quality of a composition isn't the only factor a publisher must take into account. “If I have six advanced, college-level quartets on my desk, but I only have room to publish two for a particular project, I’ll shelve some music. It’s not because the piece is something we necessarily don’t want to publish; it comes down to a well-balanced, overall project.”

Sometimes persistence is the next best step, moving to a second or third choice publisher, but other times patience may be the best course of action. Chris continues by saying, “There have been several occasions when I’ve published past submissions, as far back as five years, because they fit a particular need in that year’s project that was missing.”

The process of narrowing down potential publishers to a first, second, or third choice, can be accomplished by asking a few simple questions. Do you buy music from this publisher? Publishers whose music you’ve played or programmed are probably companies worth considering first. What is their professional reputation and for what genre, style, or focus are they particularly recognized? Their reputation inevitably becomes connected to you and your music as well. If you want the best exposure possible for your graduate-level marimba solo, sending it to a publisher known for accessible middle school percussion ensembles likely isn’t the best choice regardless of how respected the company may be. How does your piece fit in the publisher’s catalog and does it complement what is already available or duplicate something in which they have already invested? A new method book for timpani might be a great addition to a publisher with several timpani solos, or it could be quickly rejected by a company already promoting another composer’s text. What is your benefit from an affiliation with this publisher, and what would be their benefit in a partnership with
you? You need to be confident of the answer to the first part of this question, but you need to be clearest in communicating the answer to the second part. Publication is a partnership, and they will look for the benefits of your name and reputation just as you considered theirs.

Remember to also take advantage of any potential personal interactions with publishers. Visit conventions such as Midwest or PASIC and introduce yourself at the publishers’ exhibition booths. Have your scores handy, just in case the conversation moves in that direction, but make the intent of these visits to ensure that they can put a face with a name in your future communication.

PROS AND CONS OF SELF-PUBLISHING

Given that most composer royalties hover around ten percent of the retail or wholesale price, it would seem like self-publishing is the easy way to make more money. Certainly self-publishing composers retain a greater percentage of the sale price of the copies of music they are able to distribute, but the costs and distribution potential must be considered as well. As a self-publisher, you are responsible, at a minimum, to prepare the professional score, file for copyright protection, print and bind the music (or pay to have the scores and parts printed and bound if you don’t own the proper equipment), promote your music (including submission for reviews in professional publications), invoice and collect payment, package and ship orders, and manage a variety of accounting, tax, and licensing responsibilities.

Cort McClaren of C. Alan Publications reminds composers that, “A publisher will advertise and promote your music through a complex array of music dealers (foreign and domestic), distributors, direct contact with teachers and professional musicians, conferences, and organizations. The publisher absorbs cost of design, printing, advertising and promotion, storage, world-wide distribution, licensing, and works with numerous industry groups (Harry Fox Agency, ASCAP, BMI, etc.) in an effort to legally safeguard your music and protect it against copyright infringement.” As a self-publisher, all of those responsibilities are either yours or simply left undone.

Jamie Whitmarsh, percussionist and award-winning composer, has chosen to self-publish selected compositions within his catalog. “I am distributing these titles entirely in PDF format for now, since it is logistically easiest, and helps me keep prices down,” Whitmarsh explains. Digital sheet music publication has become more widespread and certainly reduces costs associated with publication, but it also opens up new issues of document security, potentially reduces exposure if those titles aren’t also available through distributors, and again requires an investment of time to create digital files and determine the best method or company to facilitate the distribution. It should be obvious by now that a few of the responsibilities of the composer-publisher require a financial investment, but the majority of the burden is a significant commitment of time, and as the saying goes, “Time is money.”

One of the greatest hurdles for self-publication is gaining exposure for your music. It is expected that most publishers will attend and rent booth space at PASIC, Midwest, and other regional and national conventions, and they typically have their full catalog carried by major sheet music distributors, allowing them an opportunity to showcase (and sell) your music in ways impractical or impossible for a composer-publisher. Cashing a yearly royalty statement for ten percent of 300 sales can easily be more financially efficient than 100 percent of 25 sales minus all the time and money invested.

On the other hand, another benefit of self-publishing is the assurance that you retain full ownership rights for your music. The transfer of ownership that is central to most publishing contracts allows the publisher to make any number of decisions regarding your piece, including something as significant as selling or transferring it to another publisher or as basic as how conscientious they will be about filling orders and maintaining stock of your piece. Blake Tyson, Associate Professor of Percussion at University of Central Arkansas, explains that he self-publishes the majority of his pieces simply because, “I feel very connected to my pieces and, at this point in my life, I don’t feel comfortable giving away the copyright to someone else.”

If you want to make an improvement or correction, create an alternate arrangement, or license your music for use in any number of outlets, that decision and potential income is yours and yours alone. Membership in performing rights organizations like ASCAP or BMI allows composers to collect performance royalties, and self-publishers collect both the composer and publisher share. However, again, the burden of collecting and submitting programs to these organizations isn’t shared. Ultimately, the option to self-publish needs to be based on many different factors such as your individual exposure and distribution potential, the amount of personal control and ownership desired, and the amount of time you are personally willing to invest in your composition after it is written.

GOOD LUCK

As most published composers will attest, “no” typically precedes a “yes” when it comes to publication submissions. In fact, often several “nos” precede the first “yes.” During the wait for a response, you can continue to share your music with colleagues and garner extra feedback or exposure, and of course, continue to write more music. Once you’ve developed a relationship with a publisher or a reputation

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Whether you are working on your first or 101st composition, thank you for writing new music, thank you for making your creative outlet available to other musicians, and good luck in your continued compositional and publication pursuits. An additional thanks from me to Blake, Brian, Chris, Cort, Jamie, and Murray for their contributions to and assistance with this article.