Most percussionists I know dabble in composing. Only a few, however, possess the basic entrepreneurial skills needed to turn their compositions into supplemental income. I am referring to self-publishing, a growing trend among many amateur and professional composers.

Many composers can benefit artistically and financially from self-publishing. It allows them to keep the rights to their compositions and to retain all income derived from publishing. Self-publishing also enables composers to market, promote, and sell their music on their own terms. These independent composers, who have the freedom to use non-traditional and more personalized marketing methods, may have a better chance of attracting today’s musicians.

In order to establish yourself as a self-published composer, you must first familiarize yourself with the basics of music publishing.

THE BASICS

There are three common ways that your compositions can make you money:

Print Royalties: This is money generated from the reproduction and sales of printed sheet music of your composition. In a standard publishing deal, your publishing company will probably keep 90% of the print royalties; 10% will go to you, the composer. As a self-published composer, you will keep 100% of print royalties.

Performance Royalties: If your composition is performed live by another musician, or played on radio, television, or in a public place, you earn money. This money is usually collected and paid to you by a performing rights organization such as ASCAP, BMI, or SESAC, depending on which one you are affiliated with. In a standard publishing deal, your publishing company will probably keep 50% of your performance royalties; the other 50% will go to you, the composer. As a self-published composer, you will keep 100% of performance royalties.

Mechanical Royalties: If your composition is recorded by another artist, released, and sold to the public, you earn money for every audio copy sold. The standard government rate for a recording less than five minutes in length is 9.1 cents, known as the statutory mechanical rate. The artist or the artist’s record label pays these royalties to you. (Publishing companies are typically represented by mechanical royalty collection agencies, such as the Harry Fox Agency, which collect royalties on behalf of the publishing company. The Harry Fox Agency typically represents publishing companies, not self-published composers.) In a standard publishing deal, your publishing company will probably keep 50% of your mechanical royalties; the other 50% will go to you, the composer. As a self-published composer, you will keep 100% of mechanical royalties.

With that said, there is one main goal you should have as a self-published composer: get people excited about your music, enough so that they want to purchase the sheet music, perform the work, and record it. Before I delve into this topic, let me first outline a strategy for self-publishing one of your compositions.

WHERE TO START

Your first step should be to register a copyright claim for your composition with the U.S. Copyright Office. This will protect your legal rights to the composition and will allow you to seek damages in the event of copyright infringement. While this may sound complicated, it is actually a simple process thanks to a new online division of the U.S. Copyright Office: the Electronic Copyright Office, or ECO. For $35.00, the ECO allows you to file a claim and upload your files online, thus avoiding the traditional hassle of mailing in forms, scores, and sound recordings. Visit www.copyright.gov/eco to find tutorials and tips for filing a copyright registration online.

The next thing you should do is affiliate yourself with a performing rights organization such as ASCAP, BMI, or SESAC. Your performing rights organization, or PRO, will license and monitor public performances of your compositions, collect your royalties, and pay you according to a specific payment system. Here is a link to ASCAP’s payment system for more detailed information: www.ascap.com/about/payment/pdf/paymentSystem/ASCAP_PaymentSystem.pdf

Usually, PROs charge a nominal fee (around $25.00) for membership, and may request a résumé and additional materials to support your application. PROs retain the right to restrict membership, so make sure your materials are put together in a professional manner. Before you apply to join a PRO, do some research to decide which one is best for you. For example, commercial composers tend to lean towards BMI, while classical composers tend to lean towards ASCAP.

Note: If you are not affiliated with a performing rights organization, you have the right to issue your own performing license for public performances of your compositions, and are able to negotiate your own fee.

It is also important to know that as the copyright owner of a composition, you have the right to license the first sound recording of your composition to whomever you’d like. If the first sound recording of your composition is recorded and released to the public without your consent, you are able to seek legal damages against the record label or artist that released your composition. After you license off the first sound recording of your composition, any artist can legally record and publicly release sound recordings of your composition without your consent, as long as they pay you the statutory mechanical rate for every copy sold.

MARKETING TOOLS

It’s time to create a marketing plan for your composition. First, write a catchy pitch that describes the musical and emotional elements of your work. Try to avoid general adjectives like “unique” or “different.” I like to describe my pieces using artists that people may know. For example: “The piece sounds like Thom Yorke on marimba if he studied with Gordon Stout.” A short paragraph of three to four strong sentences is all you need.

The next thing you should do is create a quality recording of your composition for promotional use. This is absolutely essential! One way to do this is to mail or e-mail scores to college and high school music programs you know, requesting that your piece be performed. Remember your pitch? This is a good time to use it. Many colleges and high schools record performances, so you won’t have to pay recording costs. There are also many self-recording devices that are reasonably priced, such as mini disk players and MP3 recorders. While these devices won’t produce a professional recording, they can definitely suit your needs. You absolutely need a well-performed, decently recorded performance to use as a promotional tool. Without one it will be difficult for musicians to get excited about your piece.

Once you have a solid recording, create a website that contains audio samples of your composition, your descriptive pitch, your background, your contact information, and the price and availability of your score. There are many free websites with music players on the Internet that you can utilize, such as Myspace.com. I have a Myspace page devoted specifically to my music, which allows anyone in the world to hear my compositions and read about what I’m
As a self-published composer, you will be able to keep all income derived from selling scores and all performance royalties paid to you by your performing rights organization.

Today’s musicians are always searching for new repertoire to perform. Self-publishing gives independent composers a chance to reach these musicians, while at the same time controlling how their compositions are marketed and produced. As a self-published composer, you will be able to keep all income derived from selling scores and all performance royalties paid to you by your performing rights organization. If someone is interested in recording and selling a sound recording of your composition, it’s icing on the cake.

In the end, you may find the process of self-publishing a fun and rewarding experience, or you may realize why publishing companies exist in the first place. With online marketing and promotional tools at your fingertips, I believe self-publishing is worth trying, more so than ever before.

Ivan Trevino is a percussionist, composer, and music entrepreneur. He manages and performs with Break of Reality, a cello rock quartet dedicated to keeping instrumental music alive and relevant. He holds degrees in Percussion Performance and Music Education from the Eastman School of Music and has also earned a Professional Certificate in Music Business from the Berklee College of Music’s Extension School. Ivan currently studies percussion with Michael Burritt, Bill Cahn, and Charles “Chip” Ross at the Eastman School of Music. Visit www.myspace.com/ivantrevino for more information.

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**CONCLUSION**

Today’s musicians are always searching for new repertoire to perform. Self-publishing gives independent composers a chance to reach these musicians, while at the same time controlling how their compositions are marketed and produced. As a self-published composer, you will be able to keep all income derived from selling scores and all performance royalties paid to you by your performing rights organization. If someone is interested in recording and selling a sound recording of your composition, it’s icing on the cake.

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