

Basics of Self-Publishing

By Ivan A. Trevino

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, who 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 now 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 biography, 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

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doing. While it isn't the most professional website, it definitely gets the job done, and it's free. If you would prefer to have your own personal website, many companies offer website templates at a reasonable price. For instance, check out Dynamod.com, which offers flash website templates designed specifically for musicians.

You may be interested in adding an online payment system to your website, which would enable your customers to enter their credit card information and purchase your piece directly from your site. PayPal offers some of the most commonly used online payment systems. Visit www.paypal.com for details on their various programs and associated fees.

Next, you need to identify your target market. Ask yourself, "Who is likely to be interested in my composition?" For example, if your piece is written for percussion ensemble, your target market can be high school, college, or professional percussion ensembles. Create a database of these contacts with names, numbers, and e-mail addresses. This database will come in handy for marketing future compositions. Don't be shy; the more people you include in your database, the better chance you have of reaching someone who is interested in your music.

Note: If you have the funds, you may be able to purchase contact databases from companies and organizations. This can save you a good amount of time and energy.

After you have compiled your contact list, create and send a concise and friendly e-mail to your target market that includes the following information: a bit about yourself, your composition pitch, an Internet link to an audio recording of your piece, instructions on how to purchase the piece, and your contact information. If your composition is solid, your recording is good, and your marketing is strong, you may get some positive responses from people who are interested in purchasing your score.

If you want to try a different approach, consider purchasing a classified ad in newsletters, journals, or magazines (such as this one) to get the word out to an even broader audience. You should also try non-traditional methods of marketing, such as blogging and YouTube. The Internet is potentially your most valuable marketing asset. Take advantage of it.

PRINTING, DISTRIBUTING AND SELLING

Before printing copies of your score, make sure it is presentable, easy to read, and easy to

use. For example, make sure that all page turns are manageable, the notes are all correct, and the expressive markings are clearly indicated. Once you proof your composition, research your best printing options. Try visiting a copy shop like FedEx Kinkos where you can copy and bind your scores.

Duplicating and binding scores will provide a good reference for pricing your piece. For example, if it costs you \$5.00 to create a hard copy and \$2.00 to ship it, you can probably sell the piece for \$14.00. Creating hard copies of your score will cost you money, so make sure you only print as many as you need. You should also research the prices of published compositions that are similar to your composition. Make sure your piece is in the same price range as what is out there.

As an alternative to the traditional method of printing, many self-publishers sell PDF files of their books and music scores exclusively online. Many companies facilitate this method of self-publishing, such as createspace.com or lulu.com. This may be something to look into if you don't have the time or funds to make print copies of your music. However, these companies usually take a percentage of your earnings (sometimes up to 25%), so do the math and figure out if this is right for you.

Make sure to keep track of all of your expenses, such as printing costs, website fees, copyright and registration fees, and all other business-related expenses. Keep all receipts and documentation for all business expenses and income generated. You can deduct most business expenses from your taxes; contact a tax specialist for detailed information.

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.

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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