



Composers talking: commissioning new music for voluntary performing groups

Prepared by **Alan Bullard** on behalf of **Making Music** and **BASCA**

Foreword

Making Music (formerly the National Federation of Music Societies) was founded by composer George Dyson in 1935, and since then its flourishing membership has shown a continuous appetite for contemporary music. In more recent times it has commissioned a number of new works, developed its own category of the British Composer Awards, and run the popular Adopt a Composer scheme. Its New Music Group works to help Making Music members benefit from performing and commissioning new works, as well as encouraging composers to write for the voluntary sector. This guide will, I am sure, stimulate composers and performing groups into new adventures. We are especially grateful to Alan Bullard for his work on this and to BASCA members for their valuable advice drawn from a rich variety of experience. It has been a fruitful partnership.

Peter Lawson, Chair of Making Music

The **British Academy of Songwriters, Composers and Authors (BASCA)** has always recognised the importance of writing for the amateur community. The Composers Guild of Great Britain was formed within a decade of the National Federation of Music Societies to represent the interests of classical composers. At the end of the last century the Guild amalgamated with two other writer groups to form BASCA.

In the last century many of our greatest composers, including Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst and Benjamin Britten, wrote music especially for the amateur community. They considered it a vital part of music making and it is great to see so many of today's most prominent composers writing for this same community. In this guide, composers and performers will find a wonderful treasury of sound advice from a wide variety of composers with experience in writing for amateur groups. We are delighted to have worked with Making Music, which represents over 3,000 societies and groups in this sector.

Simon Darlow, Chair of BASCA

Introduction

This briefing is about undertaking commissions for ‘amateur’ musicians, for example the many choirs and instrumental ensembles that are members of Making Music. The inverted commas are deliberate, as of course many ‘amateur’ players perform the same repertoire as ‘professional’ groups. However, for many composers these groups represent a fruitful opportunity to respond to the needs and interests of a very large group of musicians with a wide range of skills and interests.

To produce this briefing, I have selected comments from around 20 composer colleagues, ranging from young composers who are included in Making Music’s Adopt a Composer scheme, to established composers with many years of experience of working with voluntary musicians. Coming from composers, they are naturally aimed at composers – though those voluntary groups involved or considering getting involved in commissioning music may find them useful, too.

These are grouped under four headings, and can be summarised as follows:

1. Why should composers write music for voluntary ensembles?

- Both the composer and the performers experience a special exchange of enthusiasm and commitment.
- The audience for contemporary music is enriched and broadened.
- There can be a unique impact on local communities.
- Composers find that the challenges, encouragement and rewards make them ‘better composers’.
- There is a better chance of multiple performances.
- Voluntary performers have open minds, are keen to learn, and take new work seriously.

2. What technical aspects should the composer bear in mind?

- When writing for voluntary performers, composers do not need to lose sight of their own artistic vision.
- Composers should meet and get to know the group that they writing for; some see the process as broadly collaborative.
- Writing for voluntary performers requires skill; they may not be as technically proficient as professionals, but they are just as smart and perceptive.

3. Are there any musical or stylistic aspects that the composer should consider?

- Provide some challenges for the performers; don’t ‘dumb down’.
- Groups will tend to commission composers whose style they like.
- It’s not always possible to separate technical, musical, and stylistic aspects.

4. What practical matters are relevant to the composer in commissions for voluntary ensembles?

- Clarity in matters of contracts and fees.
- Cultivating a good working relationship with conductor and performers.
- Clear notation with clear explanation of what is wanted.
- Unlike professionals, voluntary performers are giving up their own time, and often paying to participate.

Comments from individual composers

1. Why should composers write music for voluntary ensembles?

'One of the key reasons is the opportunity it gives a composer to pass on their enthusiasms to people whose performing experience probably does not normally include contemporary music. With luck, I believe that such engagement can also lead to an enriched audience for contemporary music.'

Chris Swithinbank

'The technical precision of working with professional musicians is breathtaking, but equally, I've found the emotional journey of working with voluntary groups very moving. I'm particularly interested in the impact that composers working with voluntary musicians have had on local communities.'

Shirley Thompson

'I think the most important reason is that it makes us better composers by forcing us to think completely differently about the whole process. A recent orchestral commission required me to not only write a piece of music, but also to find ways of managing a collaborative relationship between myself and all those individual players. I had to very quickly learn important lessons about leadership, communication, and, perhaps most importantly, how to walk that fine creative line between familiarity and novelty – making new and abstract musical approaches feel meaningful to both performers and audience.'

Andrew Hall

'Voluntary musicians sometimes also have fewer preconceptions and less self-consciousness, meaning that both you and they can try new things out without fear of embarrassment or failure.'

Jessica Curry

'There's nothing more heart-warming for a composer than the occasion when an voluntary choral singer comes up to you after the first performance of 'their' work and says something like 'We really hated your piece when we first got it, but we gradually came to love it and can't get it out of our heads now.'

Alan Bullard

'Speaking practically, you're much more likely to get a second, third or more performances writing for voluntary ensembles such as a wind ensemble or choir.'

Adam Gorb

'As voluntary ensembles aren't being paid to play, they are sometimes even more enthusiastic than professional groups. Writing for voluntary performers as well as professionals gets your music out to a wider audience, and of course voluntary musicians make up much of the concert-going public.'

Elizabeth Winters

'I have always enjoyed the sheer commitment and passion of voluntary musicians and am thrilled at the effort put into performances. Such musicians can be brilliantly clever and give wonderfully insightful interpretations of music written for them. Examples of famous musical amateurs include Albert Einstein, Samuel Beckett and George Washington. I wouldn't have passed up the opportunity to have worked with them.'

Simon Speare

'Voluntary ensembles are the lifeblood of (British) music-making, from steel pan bands to brass bands, orchestras to rock choirs. I truly believe that if you are a composer, you should want to write different sorts of music for ALL members of the community to perform. I find it hugely rewarding, when visiting rehearsals or performances, to see singers getting stuck into sometimes quite unusual vocal textures. Composing is a living, breathing art form, and there is no better way for voluntary ensembles to realise that than by performing something new - and even better if it's by a composer that they can meet!'

Kerry Andrew

'Most voluntary singers and players are very keen to be included in new music and welcome the participation of the composer at all stages of the rehearsals and concerts. Their enthusiasm and sense of discovery is very refreshing.'

John McLeod

'Composers should write for voluntary musicians, as they are keen to learn, open to suggestion, and an important source of future audiences for contemporary music.'

Anthony Bailey

'Writing for voluntary musicians is an opportunity to share your music with a wider constituency than just the professional world, and it enables you to distil your musical thoughts into a possibly simpler and more lucid form. With voluntary performers you have to think more carefully about what they can and cannot manage, and you may have to strip away some layers of needless complexity, perhaps not a bad thing for a composer to do.'

John Rutter

'I find writing for voluntary ensembles incredibly rewarding because the players' only driving force to sit in long rehearsals and performances is their passion for music and their love of the art, and this enthusiasm shows through in the music. There are thousands of voluntary ensembles in the UK that have a hunger for trying something new!'

Alexander Campkin

'Writing for voluntary performers is incredibly rewarding on many counts – firstly, they often take the work extremely seriously and can bond to it in a way that professionals rarely do; and secondly, there is a real composition challenge in writing music for practical use which can be really beneficial for a composer.'

Paul Mealor

'It sets composers a challenge which can raise questions about what our own music is and who it is for; it forces a connection with new music which otherwise the voluntary performer themselves might shy away from. But there are also dangers in this - the voluntary group takes a risk on the composer that they will write something which is appropriate to their standard (both technical and musical) without compromising their style. It needs to be a rewarding experience for them, or in future they may be less likely to work with a composer again.'

John Webb

2. What technical aspects should the composer bear in mind?

'When writing for mixed technical abilities I think creatively about realising my ideas in a practical manner, but I must not lose sight of following my musical vision without compromise. When challenging the players, I aim to make only make one aspect of the music hard at a time, for instance hard rhythm and simple notes, or vice versa.'

Alexander Campkin

'It's important to know the people/ group you're writing for and tailor the piece to their strengths. You should never lose sight of your artistic goal as a composer, whatever that may be, but there will almost certainly be practical concerns with voluntary performer that a professional group doesn't have. I always like to view these concerns not as restraints or limitations, but as compositional challenges: how do I create the piece I want to, whilst giving the performers something they can actually 'get together' in the time that they have.'

Paul Mealor

'In some ways you have to be a more skilled composer to write well for amateurs than for professionals, because if you don't know the technique of voices and instruments thoroughly, it may not matter with professional performers. With voluntary performers, you will be found out.'

John Rutter

'Voluntary musicians may not be as technically proficient as professionals, but they are just as (often more) smart and perceptive. They are usually paying to be there, often contributing to the commission (as opposed to professionals who are being paid).'

Adam Gorb

'Consider flexible scoring such as graphic scores, or parts that don't specify a particular instrument. These are ways that you can generate really unusual sounds in a relatively uncomplicated manner. If you're writing something especially for a particular voluntary ensemble, meet them before you write anything. Find out what sort of piece they would like and what they are interested in. Perhaps even incorporate, if it's relevant, thematic, musical or lyrical ideas from the ensemble. It gives the group a real sense of ownership over the work.'

Kerry Andrew

'The most exciting projects with voluntary musicians, for me, have contained huge amounts of collaboration. I now see myself as a cog in a wheel which moves toward a rewarding shared musical experience, rather than part of any hierarchical structure involving composer, conductor, performer, audience, etc. This knowledge has informed much of my recent work, which is now far more collaborative and 'giving' to musicians than before. As for the technical and practical aspects, these come out of dialogue with voluntary musicians and with experience of working with them.'

Simon Speare

'Like any group it is always important to work with the ensemble when writing the piece - who are the best players? Who are the most reliable ones? Who are the ones that might turn up on the day and who are the ones who won't show up ever again? After all if they do not enjoy working on your piece then what hope is there for anyone, as they are often the audience that go to contemporary music concerts!'

Edmund Joliffe

'With voluntary musicians you have to be more careful to write to their strengths. Also, it's important to remember they are giving up time to play your music so they appreciate it if you write something suited to them, which they enjoy playing.'

Elizabeth Winters

'There are many technical considerations to bear in mind, and in some cases they can form a framework for what you can do musically, but they need not compromise the composers opportunity to write interesting and challenging music. It is most important to make scores as clear as possible and not to clutter the notation with an excess of information and a level of complexity that might be unnecessary.'

Christopher Hussey

3. Are there any musical or stylistic aspects that the composer should consider?

'Try writing in such a way to distribute important musical moments to as many different parts of the ensemble as possible. Judging the level of difficulty in the music can be tricky: a composer has to balance the need for ease and speed of rehearsing with presenting an enjoyable challenge to the players.'

Andrew Hall

'You can probably assume that commissioners have come to you, rather than somebody else, because they like the style of your music! But it's not always possible to separate technical, musical, and stylistic aspects. Musical ideas can themselves grow from the strengths and the limitations of the players' technique. I might have had my tongue very slightly in my cheek when I once said that that I enjoy the technical and creative challenges of writing a Grade 1 piece as much as any other, but the basic principle holds true, and very precise compositional criteria can often be liberating.'

Alan Bullard

'Write within the ensemble's capabilities. But: don't dumb down. Give the ensemble something small that might be totally new for them - a technique, a texture, a theatrical note. And most importantly: retain your own compositional voice.'

Kerry Andrew

'In some ways writing for voluntary musicians provides a challenge for the composer which writing for professionals does not. A professional ensemble can play or sing anything written for them (within reason!) whereas some care and thought needs to be given to writing for the amateur; i.e. range of the instrument or voice; the technical difficulty; and for instruments, being familiar with the dynamic of the instrument,. But at the same time, it is important to provide material which challenges and inspires the performer. Not always an easy task!'

Cecilia MacDowall

'Don't write down. Simplicity is not the same thing as banality. Know your medium thoroughly, so you avoid unnecessary awkwardness. Study the particular group you are writing for, including its conductor and accompanist if it's a choral group. If the conductor doesn't 'get' a tricky rhythm, the choir won't get it either! At the same time, don't avoid all challenge: if the music can be fully grasped on first sing- or play-through, everyone will be bored by the time of the performance. Unpaid performers need some reward during rehearsal or they lose heart and lose interest.'

John Rutter

4. What practical matters are relevant to the composer?

'The wonderful advantage of writing music for voluntary musicians is that you will often have much more time to rehearse the music. A really successful collaboration, in my experience, can be had when the composer spends time cultivating a working relationship with the group through being involved in the rehearsal process. This way, the musicians will feel part of the compositional process, and have a crucial involvement in a 'joint venture.'

Christopher Hussey

'Understanding the different ways in which voluntary musicians approach and learn a piece; finding ways in which to introduce material and allow them to learn might be useful.'

Chris Swithinbank

'Meet the group, talk to them, create a workshop in which you find out what they'd like to get out of the commission. Listen to a performance or two. Share your music with them. In other words build up some trust between you and them. Try out ideas with them in rehearsal before the piece is complete, so they can hear it developing and feel part of the composition process, and they can hear any changes which occurred as a result of the rehearsal. Many voluntary music-making groups are formed because they enjoy the social element as well as the music – so try and create a situation in which you're involved in the social side as well. Don't be a composer who descends from on high with the completed piece. Make it a conversation with the group.'

John Webb

'I would advise any composer who gets a commission from a voluntary group to make it a priority to go and listen to them to see where their technical and musical skills lie.'

John McLeod

'Aim to judge what is required of you. Some commissioning groups will require (and benefit from) active involvement from the composer throughout the compositional process, while others will be more than happy to trust the composer to get on with it, awaiting the finished product.'

Alan Bullard

'Keep the notation as simple and clear as possible. Keep the time signatures simple. Don't hide behind complexity, and trust the players to interpret your music.'

Alexander Campkin

'Often when writing scores it can be good to double lines in other instruments so they can latch onto them. And it's very important to give cues.'

Edmund Joliffe

'Be careful to stimulate and not over complicate. Take time to listen to and understand your players so that you can write suitable music for them. Take time to explain what your piece is about. Think about the location and type of audience you are expecting.'

Anthony Bailey

'Ensure you (or your publisher) have some kind of a contract with the commissioner – an official contract or an exchange of letters – which lays down essential matters such as length, scoring, delivery date, performance date, fee (normally half on signing agreement and half on completion), copyright (normally remains with the composer with an agreement for the commissioner to give the first performance), ownership of score/parts, etc. It's much better to get all these things agreed in advance, for both parties. As well as Making Music and BASCA, organisations such as ISM and Sound and Music can help with various aspects of contracts and give an idea of fees.'

Alan Bullard

'Make sure that the conductor can discuss your score in detail because if he or she doesn't understand it, the ensemble will have a hard time!! Also make sure the actual parts are clear and legible (fairly large print because many voluntary players are mature in age) with easily turnable pages - it's surprising how these little things sometimes make a huge difference to rehearsals!'

John McLeod

'New music often contains unfamiliar sonorities and chord shapes. The players can't always tell by ear whether they are playing the right notes or not because they don't know how it should sound. I sometimes try to get round this by letting them hear a synthetic version of the piece.'

Jolyon Laycock

'I sang with a group for a term before I started writing for them. That way you get to know everyone and interesting conversations and directions inevitably occur. Don't be afraid to workshop ideas with your group.'

Jessica Curry

'Practical aspects involve, for example, maintaining a meaningful creative relationship, whereby the performers feel they have access to the creative process, whilst also balancing their needs as a performing ensemble with a limited time-frame. This in itself requires creativity on the part of the composer - use of leadership, surveys, questionnaires, use of the internet to distribute ideas etc.'

Andrew Hall

'The ability to articulate and explain why you are doing things or asking someone to do them is very important. If something is challenging or difficult to carry out, the sonic result might not immediately be quite as conceived. In those situations, being able to talk about the sound you are aiming for and why that sound is exciting/beautiful/important can be invaluable.'

Chris Swithinbank

An afterword

Here's another quote from Christopher Hussey, one of the composers on Making Music's Adopt A Composer scheme:

'Encouraging composers to write for voluntary musicians is necessary to increase the amount of positive activity in this area – but also, encouraging amateurs that they would like to collaborate with composers is also a critical part of the equation. To achieve this, there does need to be a proper platform for networking, whereby voluntary groups and interested composers can find out about each other and match up their interests.'

Perhaps Making Music could work with BASCA to develop its **Find a Composer** link in more than just a virtual environment.

Finally, thanks to all the composers who have contributed to this paper and to Andrew Potter, Sally Groves and Barbara Eifler for their assistance and advice. I have made many cuts and small editorial changes, thus any error or lack of clarity is mine.

I'd also like to thank Making Music and the British Academy of Composers, Songwriters and Authors (BASCA) for encouraging the production of this leaflet.

ALAN BULLARD, December 2013