ISM Composers’ views

Geoffrey Poole

Remember that moment in *Amadeus* when Leopold Mozart scorns his son’s fanciful ambition? – *There’s no money in Composition!* Wolfgang runs from job to job, composing, performing, teaching, publishing, creating subscription concerts, courting wealthy benefactors, collaborating with librettists and being short-changed by theatres. It is ironic that the composer – the artistic originator, designer, architect of all that Western musicians do – was typically at the bottom of the income chain, while everybody else from diva to cleaner gets paid. And today, it is still true.

The ISM’s excellent new contract templates will directly benefit composers of high reputation. For others, they will serve as an ideal from which to negotiate. It is difficult for emerging and less famous composers to turn down interest from a publisher - who will hopefully bring wider circulation, prestige and permanence, investment and career development, and negotiate commissions. But contractual agreements cannot predict the future, or trump the vicissitudes of taste. Remember too that self-published composers retain certain advantages – instant printing and availability, immediate revision / rearrangement of own tunes, flexible fees, and (for what it’s worth) undivided royalties. Publication needs to match your target market.

As for commission contracts, my experience and that of many colleagues suggests that Austerity has hit hard. There is little money, public or private, kicking around for commissions, and performers / promoters are often too hard pressed themselves to bid for it. Mozart continues to supply repertoire for free. Thus we currently find ourselves writing for very little, or *gratis* – for friendship, for pupils, to raise profile, to serve community, to create bonds, to fulfil an imaginative dream, self discovery. We are slaves to our inspiration: we use it or lose it. It’s unfair, it’s unsustainable; a major culture in a wealthy nation deserves better.

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Kirsty Devaney

What does it mean to be a professional in the creative industries? Is it about attitude and mind-set? Is it to do with payment and workload? Or is it about our actions? Having graduated from my undergraduate studies in composition two years ago I have been questioning what it means to be a professional composer and musician.

One of the main transitioning factors from student to professional composer is taking on more responsibilities whilst trying to earn a living doing what you love to do. Whilst being a student, money used to seem like a dirty word, but it is an important aspect that needs to be considered if you want to continue composing. Something that really helped me to talk about fees was to do some basic calculations and work out what was needed to cover basic living costs (e.g. pay rent, bills, food) in order to work out how much my time was worth. Any composer knows that it is not possible to predict how many hours a piece of music will take to create but you can start to work out roughly how long the piece may take, and whether the fee is in line with what you need in order to cover your basic living costs. Of course money is not always the most important aspect for a composer, but your time is valuable and you need to ensure that you are not getting exploited for your time and skills. After doing these calculations I felt much more able to make informed decisions when accepting or declining work, or asking to alter the fees or negotiate other benefits.

Being ‘professional’ doesn’t have to mean being paid professional rates, but I think it is about having the mind-set to be informed, realistic and in control of your own work and finances. The ISM guide is perfect for early career composers who are entering the professional world and dealing with these issues for the first time. The guide helps you to consider all the relevant aspects of a contract, thus helping you make an informed decision before signing on the dotted line.

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