

Composer-in-Residence Programs: CHORUSES AS INCUBATORS FOR NEW CHORAL WORK

As with any long-term relationship, a successful composer-in-residence program is a feat of clear communication, planning, and faith. We spoke with composers and choral directors across the country about best practices, cautionary tales, and assessing whether a residency is right for your ensemble.

BY JENNIFER GERSTEN

While creating a composer-in-residence program for your chorus is no casual project, the benefits to composer and chorus make it an appealing goal for many groups. “So many of our ideas for programming require music that hasn’t been composed yet,” says Samuel Grace, director of the Minneapolis-based chorus MPLS (imPulse). Grace says he dreams of finding “composers who are excited about working on our projects, paying them well, and establishing a real relationship.”

It’s a dream for composers too, says Vince Peterson, artistic director of the Brooklyn-based chorus Choral Chameleon: “I think that a composer-in-residence

program is the most intimate, most trusting experience a conductor can offer to a composer.” During residencies, composers become deeply acquainted with every facet of an ensemble, as well as the creative freedom to marshal the group’s potential. “When you’re working in a vacuum, you’re trying to make something” that singers will generally find accessible, says composer Melissa Dunphy. Working directly with a chorus, however, can yield a uniquely personal, meaningful product. Composer Dale Trumbore has been a resident with Choral Chameleon as well as Nova Vocal Ensemble, based in Glendale, California. For Nova Vocal Ensemble, she wrote one work with the voice of one of the ensemble’s sopranos in mind. “I really don’t think I

would have written those specific pieces for any other group,” she says of working with both choruses. “If you’re writing with a certain group in mind, you can really pour your heart into the pieces, and other ensembles will be able to feel that warmth.”

For choruses, residencies are a chance to have music written that is expressly tailored to their needs. Members have the opportunity to interact with a composer whose mission is to know their voices as intimately as possible, which in turn improves their musicality. In the Toronto-based Oriana Women’s Choir, the composer-in-residence, Matthew Emery—now in his fifth season with the ensemble—attends at least one rehearsal, often more, before ▶



© LUCAS HAUSRATH

“If you’re writing with a certain group in mind, you can really pour your heart into the pieces, and other ensembles will be able to feel that warmth.”

—Dale Trumbore



Composer residencies with the St. Louis Chamber Chorus and artistic director Philip Barnes typically last three years.

Composer-in-Residence Programs

the premiere. “Initially, there was a lot of nervousness in the rehearsal room about ‘performing’ for Matthew Emery,” says Oriana board chair Susan Astington. “But thanks to his ongoing enthusiasm and genuine appreciation for our bringing his music to life, we look forward to his visits and the opportunity to dig into the details of what he has written for us.”

Know Thy Chorus, Know Thy Composer

“Before you go out and find a composer, know your choir,” says Philip Barnes, director of the St. Louis Chamber Chorus—and vice versa. When establishing composer-in-residence programs, good relationships begin with ensuring musical compatibility. For both sides, that means careful research into the other’s perspectives, preferences,

and strengths. A composer whose wheelhouse includes experimental techniques and complex rhythms, for instance, is unlikely to be a good fit for a community chorus comprising volunteer singers with limited new music experience. Dunphy, who served in residence with St. Louis, advises composers to listen to recordings of the choir and speak with the director about possible directions for the residency before deciding whether to accept the invitation. Composers who don’t go to the effort of learning a chorus’s strengths risk presenting works that the chorus cannot bring to fruition.

Especially for nascent residencies, prioritize how you feel about the composer’s music over the composer’s reputation. “People think it’s not worth having a composer-in-residence if they don’t get Eric Whitacre, but nothing could be further from the truth,” Peterson says. Groups that are new to residencies should be most concerned with finding composers whose work is personally resonant. “Pick a composer

whom you really love, and be sure to let them know it,” Peterson says. “Ask yourself, ‘Can I live with this for an entire year? Am I really eager to hear what they’re going to do next?’ The answer has to be ‘Hell, yes!’ It can’t be ‘Yes, sort of.’”

Building Relationships

While many choruses do review cold score submissions, composers-in-residence are rarely, if ever, sourced from directors’ inboxes. “Cold submissions don’t generate the trust and empathy that is required for a yearlong commitment—you have to know the person,” Peterson says. Anthony Trecek-King, director of the Boston Children’s Chorus, advises composers seeking residencies to be persistent in building relationships with people who might be able to recommend them. One of Peterson’s strategies for building relationships with composers is Choral Chameleon’s yearly institute, an intensive eight-day program ▶

Composer-in-Residence Programs

in which composers and conductors can use Choral Chameleon as their lab choir. In general, asking other directors and composers for composer recommendations will yield a number of workable names.

Composers will occasionally benefit from serendipity. Dunphy's first residency-type experience was with the San Francisco-based Volti, after she answered a call for scores. A year later, she was approached by Philip Barnes of the St. Louis Chamber Chorus, with which she began a three-year residency entailing a single commission per year. Composers with limited or no history of choral writing might approach a community group and offer to write one or a series of works before attempting their first residency.

"A composer-in-residence program is like me inviting a person into my house and letting them play a custom instrument that I've built for myself," Peterson says. "You have to really trust a person to let them drive your fancy expensive car—and to me, Choral Chameleon is like my Maserati. They're the car to end all cars. I have a duty to protect them and honor their voices and the time and the money they give to be a part of this."

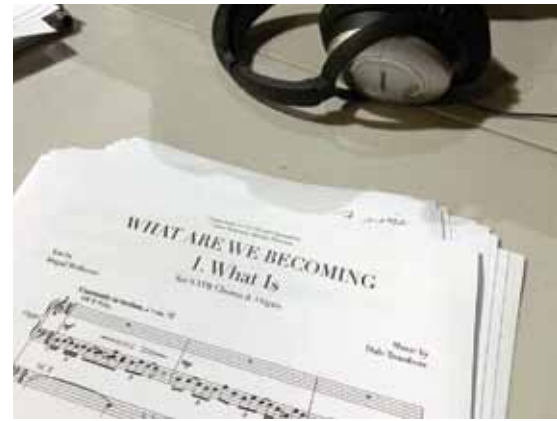
Stay Organized

Successful residencies rely upon advance planning and conscientious organization. The longer the residency, the more likely the composer is to develop a strong sense of the chorus's needs, and the more likely the chorus and composer are to form a good relationship. But strategies vary widely for ensuring residency bliss. At the St. Louis Chamber Chorus, Barnes says the program is less a residency than it is working with an "associate composer," as most of its chosen composers live far from the Midwest and cannot accommodate frequent commutes in their schedules (or the chorus's budget). And so the St. Louis program lasts for three years, a result of balancing the chorus's financial constraints with a wish to have composers as immersed as possible in the chorus's culture. Near the premiere, the chorus flies in composers for an extended weekend to attend the dress rehearsal and offer feedback, see the performance, and acquaint themselves with the chorus community over dinner.

At Choral Chameleon, the model is as follows: during the planning stages, typically 18 to 24 months in advance, Peterson speaks with the incoming composers-in-residence about his vision for their season and outlines specific guidelines for where they might source their texts. The composer then returns to Peterson with texts they have found personally resonant, and the two volley until they reach a decision. Once the texts have been established, they settle on how many pieces the composer will write, which is usually from two to three in some combination of short and long. In his contracts, Peterson sets deadlines on "dummy" dates about a month before he needs the piece to allow for unanticipated delays.

Find Your Process

A mutually satisfying score requires giving composers freedom—but not too much. "I think the mistake comes sometimes when a conductor looks at the composer and says, 'Write whatever you want,'" Peterson says. "The more specific the interaction I have with the composer, the better it goes." While a chorus could find itself in possession of a score whose unexpected challenges prove edifying, just as likely is that the composer will turn in a work poorly tailored to the chorus's abilities and perspectives. Many composers interviewed indicated the usefulness of themes and a general direction for where to source their texts. In advance of any work, choruses should be sure that composers have knowledge of the style, text, difficulty level, length, method of distribution, and due date. Yet specificity of a different sort can be a turn-off: "If a choir came to me and said, 'We sing just this kind of music and we want you to write this same kind of music,' that's less enticing than a choir saying, 'We're really interested in what you're doing and we want to help you develop your skills,'" Dunphy says.



Dale Trumbore's *What Are We Becoming* is the product of a 2018-19 residency with Choral Chameleon, which premiered the piece last April and recorded it as well.

Choruses and composers should aim for affirming, open communication during long-term residencies. In rehearsal settings, composers who are able to attend should expect that the choir and director will want to carry out their usual learning regimen, but the performers will most likely welcome the unusual opportunity to hear a composer describe how their approach is matching up with the original intent. Astington describes the ideal interaction between composer and chorus as a "two-way conversation," where both feel at liberty to offer feedback directly during rehearsal. Emery, her current composer-in-residence, talks to the singers about his decisions to set the text in certain ways and his ideas for how the group might phrase a certain passage. Discussion can also happen behind the scenes, over either email or coffee, with various chorus personnel. As composers shape their works, they should take care to indicate their appreciation for the conductor and chorus's efforts. "Imagine cooking dinner for your fiancée and they go, 'Oh, it was okay,'" quips Brandon A. Boyd, a composer based in Missouri who has served in residence with various groups, ▶



"Pick a composer whom you really love, and be sure to let them know it. Ask yourself, 'Can I live with this for an entire year? Am I really eager to hear what they're going to do next?' The answer has to be 'Hell, yes!' It can't be 'Yes, sort of.'"

—Vince Peterson



© MARK FEIRST

MPLS (imPulse) is a project-based choral ensemble based in Minneapolis and founded in 2014 by Samuel Grace.

Composer-in-Residence Programs

including the Santa Fe Desert Chorale. “No matter what, find a way to communicate what you really liked.”

Composers should also take heart in the knowledge that residencies offer the time and space to extract themselves from their comfort zones, as the extended duration for writing means more time for composers and choruses to consider what works and try new possibilities. “In a residency situation, I’d be much more open to a conductor saying, ‘Why don’t we try this?’—as opposed to how, in a non-residency situation, there would be a lot less back-and-forth,” says Trumbore. “It’s like, ‘You trust me and I trust you, and so I’m going to write this really adventurous piece.’” Composers interviewed also advocated for meeting with the choruses’ various directors over the course of the residency to confirm expectations and discuss future paths. In cases where the

composer cannot be present, email is composers’ and directors’ preferred mechanism for sharing feedback.

Connect with Your Community

A residency is an obligation to the community as well as the chorus, says composer Bill Banfield, a professor at Berklee College of Music who has served in residence with the Boston Children’s Chorus. “The composer needs to be committed to understanding how the music is going to impact the people being served,” Banfield says. “That commitment comes out of being in a dialogue between the composer, the institution, and the community.” A chorus might organize a talk about the significance of the residency’s music to the community or invite local schools, religious organizations, and other neighborhood groups to an open rehearsal.

Dunphy also advocates thinking locally when organizing a residency. Her commis-

sion with the Philadelphia-based community choir PhilHarmonia was not a residency per se, but “felt like one” on account of how frequently she was able to attend rehearsals as a Philadelphia resident herself. Choruses, particularly those outside major metropolitan areas, might be tempted for prestige’s sake to initiate residencies with composers who are based elsewhere. Choosing a composer from the neighborhood, however, can yield meaningful results for both the music and your wallet. Composers will have deeper relationships with the chorus, as they will likely be able to attend more rehearsals, and choruses will save on transportation and accommodation costs. “If you’re working with local composers, you can foster them in a much closer way, and you’re raising the profile of your city,” Dunphy says. “If regional choirs look for emerging composers in their backyards, they’ll find amazing talent.”

Don’t Plan Outside Your Means

Chorus directors warn against making promises to composers that they can’t necessarily keep. “Any choir needs to 100 percent understand that this is a legal relationship,” Barnes says. “You can’t mess with people.” Late—or worse, non-existent—payments to composers of reputations big and small have been an unfortunate footnote to the industry. Be aware of what your coffers can support and don’t issue contracts unless ▶



“The composer needs to be committed to understanding how the music is going to impact the people being served. That commitment comes out of being in a dialogue between the composer, the institution, and the community.”

—Bill Banfield

Composer-in-Residence Programs

you currently have the means to fund them in their entirety. Most composers will quote rates per minute of music, so be mindful of what lengths of music you're asking for before getting started. "If you don't have the means, then don't [start a residency]," Barnes says. "If you really want to do it, you will raise the money and you will hammer out the details."

No uniform approach exists to fundraising and paying for residency programs. Some choruses pay composers over the course of two years; others will pay the composer half their fee at the outset, then the other half upon receiving the score; others have ready commissioning budgets. When soliciting donors, composers and choruses advise that you establish naming gifts in which donors can have the residency named after their families or in memo-



© BONNIE O'SULLIVAN

"Working directly with a composer has broadened our singers' appreciation for what goes into any composition."

—Susan Astington

riam. While selecting a more visible composer can simplify fundraising, chorus directors say that projects of a certain level will speak for themselves where donors are concerned. "If you're making compelling work that people respond positively to, then people will support it," Peterson says.

Reap the Fruits

With these foundations in place, both choruses and composers can anticipate a productive, considered exchange of ideas likely to affect their work for a long time to come. "Working directly with a composer has broadened our singers' appreciation for what goes into any composition," Astington says. "We are able to take our experiences from our interactions with [Emery] and extend that thinking to pieces written by composers far away or long since departed." Sometimes the interaction inspires deeper



© MATT BISHOP

Members of the Oriana Women's Choir, based in Toronto.

responses. In the Boston Children's Chorus, Trecek-King says a few members began composing for choir after working with resident composers, even having their work premiered—proof that composers might already exist within a chorus's ranks.

Far from signaling the end of a relationship between composer and chorus, the end of a residency often galvanizes future collaborations and programming. Many composers interviewed attested to the longevity of these relationships: Emery, for instance, who has been in residence with Oriana for five seasons, has had his work featured on numerous concerts by the group, and Dunphy has been asked to produce more work for St. Louis.

Residencies often mean increased attention for choruses and composers alike. Of St. Louis's Philip Barnes, Dunphy says "I couldn't ask for a better champion of my work, and I don't say that lightly. I'll go to conferences and people will stop me and say, 'You're Melissa, Philip Barnes's composer-in-residence. He cornered me at some other conference and has been recommending you.'" Bringing residency-commissioned works to conferences can also create excitement in the choral community at large about new works.

To reach the general public, advertising through the usual channels—social media, email newsletters, and press releases—is as important as ever, but Barnes offers this additional tip for encouraging media coverage: Take advantage of the composer's presence in your community. During resident composers' visits to St. Louis, they give interviews on local radio stations and

lectures at local schools, and, of course, they are in attendance at the premieres. With the excitement of a new piece, Barnes says, one can only take heart in the work that lies ahead. "It's a huge boost to perform a piece of music that was written for you," he says. "You were in the birthing room the first time the world heard that music," and it all came about "because of something you did. It really establishes you in your community as an advocate for fresh new art." ■

Jennifer Gersten, a violinist and writer from Queens, New York, is pursuing a DMA at Stony Brook University. She is the 2018 recipient of the Rubin Prize in Music Criticism.



© Chorus America. This article is reprinted from the Winter 2019/20 issue of *The Voice*. For more resources about choruses and choral singers, visit www.chorusamerica.org.