

Top 20 Tips for Composer/Educator Collaborations

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BandQuest® celebrating 20 years!

1. Take the time to establish a rapport. Creating and teaching both hold a lot of responsibility and vulnerability, and it will take time for you both to learn about each other and your working styles. Trust is at the heart of your collaboration!
2. Before the writing starts, talk through the following in detail to get to know what the parameters are: instrumentation, melody, harmony, keys, scoring and texture, musical maturity, endurance, etc.
3. Create an agreement that outlines the terms of your collaboration including compensation, timeline (including instrumentation, duration, score and parts delivery, and payment distribution), premiere/performance rights, etc. Reach out to bandquest@composersforum.org if you'd like a sample. Commissioning fees are determined on a case-by-case basis and are personal in nature, but a jumping off point for guidelines helpful to many can be found at nmbx.newmusicusa.org/commissioning-fees-calculator/.
4. Agree on communication preferences in terms of how to reach out and what the response time needs to be for both of you to be able to do your work. For example, is phone easier than email for you? How do you want to receive feedback and review drafts? How much time do you need to process and re-engage in next steps?
5. However long you think it will take to do things, add about a month to it ;)

Educators:

6. “Use the power of Skype or other web video apps to bring a composer into the band room before even a note of the newly commissioned piece has been written. Have the composer engage the students by inviting their ideas about what they think an audience would enjoy, and what kinds of pieces are meaningful to them as musicians. Months later when the piece is being rehearsed, have the composer return and continue the conversation.” -Alex Shapiro
7. Program other works of the composer’s (or playing a recording of their works) in advance of the project so students get to know their style and sound.
8. Be honest about what your ensemble’s limitations are. The more the composer can write to your specifications, the more successful the students will be.
9. Allow for time for your students to get to know the composer as an artist and human.
10. “Use Skype or other web video apps to bring a composer into the band room to coach a rehearsal and converse with the students. A composer’s insights deepen everyone’s connection to the music on their stands, creating a relationship that extends beyond the notes and into their daily lives.” – Alex Shapiro



11. Engage the rest of the school. Does the music have any themes that might connect to other disciplines or content areas? What about a full school assembly where your band serves as the “lab ensemble” for a composer talk?
12. “Know that for many composers, each creation is a part of their soul. In commissioning a work, you are asking the composer to share a deeply personal segment of themselves, expressed in sonic form. Tread carefully and respectfully and know that composers learn and grow through trial and error. Your willingness to collaborate on a respectful and equal playing field will ensure a wondrous outcome for all.” – Jodie Blackshaw

Composers:

13. “Ask the band director to share some of their favorite pieces with you so you can see what works well for their ensemble. Study those scores!” -Tawnie Olson
14. “Spend some time with the students in the band before you even begin sketching your piece. Listen to their rehearsal, maybe do some guided improvisation with them. Getting to know their personalities and hearing them play is invaluable.” -Tawnie Olson
15. When the educator tells you about their ensemble’s current ability level, believe them!
16. Determine how you want to share your in-process work. PDFs? Actual score files? Think about the amount of control you want during the workshopping stage.
17. Engage the students in a compositional activity. You could consider leading an exercise in improvisation or aleatory.
18. “Find a band director with whom you have a great rapport, someone you feel comfortable sending sketches for their feedback. Then listen to their feedback; they know their ensemble’s capabilities and limits.” -Tawnie Olson
19. De-mystify what a composer is and does with the students. Build in time for group conversation or a Q&A around life as a creator. Many students have never met a composer (or at least they think they haven’t!).
- 20. And last but not least, enjoy the messiness of bringing new music to life!**

