

Daniel Knaggs

1. Do you like writing for strings? What are the challenges? What do you enjoy?

I love writing for strings—it can be somewhat challenging for non-string players to anticipate things like challenging fingerings, problematic jumps or stops, and harmonics that might not speak so well, etc. This all improves with experience and feedback, but the technical specifics can seem daunting at times. I have always enjoyed strings both in and of themselves and in the context of varied instrumentations. Viola in particular has a richness and a character of tone that I find very desirable so I often give it special attention in my chamber and orchestral writing.

2. If you had to write a piece for viola, which could be of any form or style, what would it be like? And why?

At this point I've written works for viola and electronics; viola, violin, and timpani; viola and saxophone; viola and harp, seven or more violas; and string quartet. But at this point, I would be most inspired to write a viola concerto. Through the past several experiences I've had getting to know the instrument, I would really love placing it in the dramatic setting of soloist versus orchestra.

3. What would you want us (instrumentalists) to do before we approach you for a commission? (e.g., play for you, send you a recording, listen to your works, etc.)

This is very person-specific. If a composer knows a performer or is familiar with the performer's playing, then it's probably not necessary to have a special session of playing for the composer (but it's not a bad idea if the two aren't familiar with each other's work). It is probably beneficial for the player to hear the composer's work first so that they at least have some idea of what to expect. If a performer is thinking "boy, I'd love a piece in the style of Yanni's music" then there could be problems... but it's helpful to have an idea of the composer's compositional trajectory to-date and to even talk about style, length, etc.

4. Under what circumstance and for what reason would you accept/reject a commission?

Time is often a major factor in accepting or turning down commissions, even when money is in the picture. Most composers probably experience periods of heavy workload and then lighter ones. Sometimes it's just an issue of the right time and the right amount of time before the due date. But don't let that stop you from asking. Some composers would be willing to write something in a week or two if the time is right (maybe a summer or something?) I personally turn things down because full-time doctoral studies and previous engagements limit what I can realistically and reliably commit to.

5. How clearly of an idea for the piece should we have before approaching you? (e.g., instrumentation, length, number of movements, etc.)

There's no single answer to this, again, it's often person-specific. If the performer is thinking "I'd do *anything* to get a Kenny G. style piece..." then it should probably be communicated. But most of the time, I've found that negotiating details like length, movements, instrumentation, deadline, etc. are best when done together rather than in a Powerpoint presentation for the composer to accept or dismiss wholesale. I actually enjoy exploring within parameters that are somewhat open (5–10 minutes, single or multiple movements, etc.) and bouncing ideas off each other throughout the duration of the process—especially if the performer is willing to deal with various hand-written manuscript drafts, giving feedback and thoughts/suggestions all the while.

6. How and how much can we take part in the creation process?

This is usually person and situation-specific. I love having the performer enrich the composition's journey with feedback, ideas, reactions, etc. Sometimes this is not possible because of geographical or even time issues, which is unfortunate. I find that I learn the most in my composing when I work with real people giving me timely input and feedback about the things that I'm writing. In the non-school sphere, it's common for me to just deliver the work by whatever agreed deadline, and then I might get to hear a dress rehearsal or a performance/recording, but I usually don't get feedback of any real substance, which means I am missing opportunities to improve on certain things (and orchestration books can only do so much). It takes courage to give and receive constructive criticism, but this is essential to developing one's craft and technique—things that should not get in the way of the music.

7. How far ahead of time should we ask?

When in doubt, err on the side of too early, even just to get an idea on someone's radar. But you might find a productive "procrastinator" who would jump at the opportunity to be motivated by pressure!

8. What do you expect in return?

This is person and situation specific too. For musicians who are trying to make it professionally, it is good for their work to be valued enough for compensation (monetary is always good because it allows the musician more time to focus on their art and less time having to seek income doing odd jobs....) but a good performance and recording are always wonderful.

9. Any other things we should know or be aware of?

Yes! Interact with composers! Share your musical wisdom and your performance perspectives with them! Teach them anything you can about your instrument and playing! Most composers are really hungry to know how best to write for real performers, and there is a danger of the digital age removing composers from the need to interact much with performers, at least until much later in the process. Performers probably don't realize how much insight they have to offer composers—but collaborating in new

initiatives stimulates a real vitality within the music world. The more you commission and collaborate with composers, the more you contribute to the present and future of music! That present and future is not (and must not be) entirely in the hands of composers!